

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media

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JUMP CUT

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HOLLYWOOD, MAINSTREAM

[Saving Mr. Banks and building Mr. Brand: the Walt Disney Company in the era of corporate personhood](#)

by Mike Budd

When Disney promotes the fiftieth-anniversary DVD of its *Mary Poppins* with Tom Hanks playing Walt in *Saving Mr. Banks* (2013), even the dead—in this case P.L. Travers, author of the Mary Poppins books—are not safe. A visual essay closely analyzes the style, narrative and ideology of *Saving Mr. Banks*, and a second essay explores the many ways this film and the corporation that produced it mutually illuminate one another.

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by Douglas Kellner

Kellner contrasts Steve McQueen's 2013 film *12 Years a Slave* with Gordon Parks' relatively unknown PBS film of 1984 *Solomon Northup's Odyssey*, in conjunction with Steven Spielberg's *Amistad* (1998) and other some non-Hollywood slave rebellion films.

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In the fierce and funny sci-fi action comedy, *Attack the Block* (Joe Cornish, 2011), a disreputable gang of teens wields samurai swords, Super Soakers, and fireworks to fend off an alien invasion of their public housing estate in South London.

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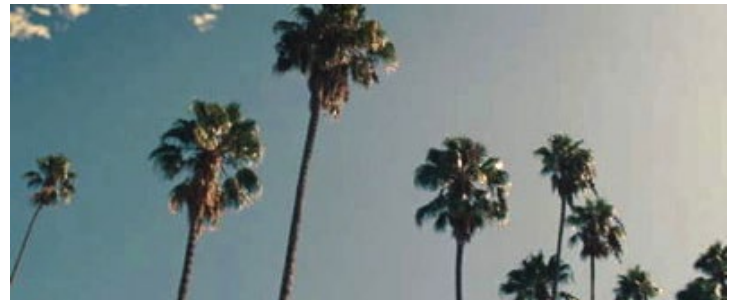
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Saving Mr. Banks and building Mr. Brand: the Walt Disney Company in the era of corporate personhood

by [Mike Budd](#)

This essay is in two parts. Part I is a visual essay closely analyzing key elements of the narrative, style, and ideology of *Saving Mr. Banks*. The images and captions in the visual essay provide illustration and further evidence for many of the larger arguments in the text in Part II. [Part II](#) critically analyzes selected aspects of the political economy, culture and history of the Walt Disney Company, and how these aspects and *Saving Mr. Banks* are mutually illuminating. Either part of the essay can be read first.^[1][\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

Part one: a visual essay



1. The opening credit sequence of *Saving Mr. Banks*, with the camera seeming to float through the sky and clouds, directly evokes a similar credit sequence in Disney's *Mary Poppins* (1964). There the camera also seemed to float through the clouds to discover the famous nanny in the skies above London. Viewers will more likely recognize the soundtrack throughout the credits, a wistful piano version of the signature song from the Disney film, "Chim Chim Cher-ee."

The release of *Saving Mr. Banks* is timed to promote the 50th Anniversary DVD/Blu-Ray of *Mary Poppins* and related Disney products as well as the image of the company and its eponymous founder. Thus the film will miss few opportunities to sell as well as narrate, attempting to activate the nostalgia that many viewers have for the earlier film and the Disney folks who produced it. More systematically than perhaps any other multinational corporation, the Walt Disney Company designs its commodities and services as ads for other Disney products, thus creating a relatively closed, internally referential corporate discourse that tends to exclude non-Disney culture where

2. A few seconds later, the apparently continuous moving shot passes these tall palm trees, with a title identifying "Maryborough, Australia, 1906." This is a narrative and stylistic hook, since a bit later in the film the adult Helen Goff, now renamed P.L. Travers, will encounter similar palm trees during a limousine ride through 1961 Los Angeles on her journey to discuss the script of *Mary Poppins* with Walt Disney and his writers.

The film motivates (justifies, explains) all the flashbacks as Travers' memories, prompted by the palm trees and other reminders in her southern California experience of another journey she didn't want to make. Flashbacks show her move in 1906 from the relatively lush Maryborough to parched rural Allora, Australia, after her father, Travers Goff, was fired from his job at a bank.

possible.



3. As the crane shot continues its descent to reveal this Maryborough garden, it catches the weathervane turning from west to east as the voice of Travers Goff (Colin Farrell) speaks intimately in voice over:

“Wind’s from the east, mist coming in, like something is brewing, about to begin. Can’t put my finger on what lies in store, but I feel what’s to happen all happened before.”

Although there is no historical evidence to suggest that Goff got this verse from her father, the film here clearly implies that she did. This Disney film will repeatedly suggest that Disney is the author of *Mary Poppins*, and that Travers only contributed autobiographical elements.



4. The shot continues to descend and tilt down, now directly over the young Helen Goff, sitting in the garden with her eyes closed. The seemingly continuous moving shot from the clouds above to the child below establishes a reassuringly stable, apparent continuity of space and time for narrative purposes. The juxtaposition of sound and moving camera as it approaches the child below suggests that the father’s words are in the child’s mind, more insistently attributing Travers’ words to Disney (and its employees, the songwriting Sherman brothers).

As the camera cranes down closer to the figure of the child below, the image quickly dissolves to...



5. ...an image of P.L. Travers in her London office in March 1961, matching both the action of the camera movement and the pose of the meditating figure at the center of both compositions. The camera comes to rest to frame an eye-level medium shot of Travers as she opens her eyes and the 1961 narrative begins. The matches on camera movement, gesture and composition in moving almost seamlessly from 1906 to 1961 imply the child, statically unchanged, resides in the woman. The film will build up this implication through repetition into causality. Seemingly the child’s trauma overtakes and determines the woman’s life before Walt Disney intervenes to save her.

This complicated and expensive opening sequence thus presents a great deal of narrative and ideological information in its economical orchestration of moving image and sound, setting up the film’s argument and beginning to sell Disney’s version of *Mary Poppins*. It also establishes the diegetic (story) spaces within which the parallel narratives will take place. The continuity editing style within the classical narrative system thus



6. The first scene establishes the conflict within the protagonist, P.L. Travers, over whether or not to sell the rights to her beloved *Mary Poppins* (“She’s family, you know”) to Walt Disney. This shot and surrounding scene are lit and composed to focus attention on the performer’s face and gestures in order to promote empathy and identification so that viewers will “naturally” confuse characters with real people.

It is a familiar editing pattern of establishing, then analyzing space in closer shots like this, then re-establishing, then again breaking down the space, all to follow an invisible but omnipresent narrating agent. Thus the breaks between shots become continuities between parts of a seamless story. The shot and scene ends with Travers saying to her agent, “I want to keep my house.” Cut to...

orients viewers in space and time.



7. ...the first flashback, returning to the young Helen in the garden (above) in 1906 Australia, now building a miniature house of sticks and leaves. Her cherubic face in close-up contrasts with the worried expression on her adult face in the previous shot. As viewers learn that the little girl is the youthful Travers, they may also begin to comprehend the beginnings of a pattern in which the adult's psychological state motivates the flashback.

As in other classical narrative films, viewers are invited to follow a trail of questions and clues, beginning with the enigmatic title: Who is Mr. Banks and why does he need to be saved? If viewers remember Mr. Banks as a character from Disney's *Mary Poppins*, why save Mr. Banks and not Mrs. Banks or the children? And by now, only a few minutes into the film's exposition, viewers are invited to understand that the flashback's motivation (justification, explanation) is something about the character's psychology.

But what? Does the pointed cut to the child building a playhouse directly after the adult character's expression of concern for her house indicate causation? Is the adult's action motivated by some yet-undisclosed childhood event? Classical narrative and continuity editing will lead viewers to preliminary answers and also more questions, gradually leading down a path of narrative mini-problems and solutions, delays and advances, through a pre-established cause-and-effect line.



8. In the next scene, Travers is on a plane to Los Angeles, and the character is constructed partly through Emma Thompson's performance of "her" snobbery and irritation at having to travel to the Disney studio. As she falls asleep in the plane, the narrative returns...

9. ...to another flashback, to another journey she disliked, with her family from Maryborough to Allora. By motivating the flashback once again as Travers' memory (or dream), and through her similar attitude to both journeys, this second return to the past draws on and contributes to viewers' commonsense pattern recognition, popular psychology and previous experience of classical narrative films and television.

Social, historical, and natural determination will take a back seat to psychological, private and personal explanations for how the world works, contributing to the naturalization of such privatized understandings.

In addition to developing the beginnings of a simple psychology for the protagonist, this flashback picks up the 1906 narrative soon after the previous flashback ended (as Helen left the garden with her father), thus following the convention of a series of flashbacks motivated by character psychology which will form



a chronological and coherent narrative about the past (1906), organized to gradually reveal the reasons for the character behavior in the chronological narrative in the present (1961).

In this shot, the Disney version of the Goff family visually articulates the family conflict. On the train to Allora travelling through the countryside, young Helen stands on the rear platform looking longingly back toward where they've left. From frame left Helen's mother glares across the frame toward her father in frame right as he takes a swig from a bottle, thus establishing his alcoholism.



10. On her arrival at the Beverly Hills Hilton, Travers finds her room filled with welcoming Disney stuffed animals, including Mickey Mouse. But she is most upset by the pears in the fruit basket, grabs them, rushes to the sliding glass doors and throws them into the swimming pool. Why pears?

Another small narrative puzzle and hook to draw us further into the diegetic world, creating conditions for empathizing with characters as if they were real people.



11. In contrast to her own uptight unhappiness, Travers first encounters Walt Disney when she sees his television image, beaming with joy, in her hotel room as he hosts his weekly anthology program, which is also a commercial for Disneyland and other Disney products. A familiar Disney pastiche of modes and styles combines nonfiction, fantasy and animation.

Tom Hanks blends his trustworthy star persona with Walt Disney's avuncular image, holding his arms out in welcome to television viewers, with Oscars and other awards providing background and Tinkerbell levitating him with her magic pixie dust.



12. The next day Travers meets the "real" Walt Disney in person in his office. He is introduced in a shot nearly identical in composition to his televised image, as if visually to reassure viewers that the public and private Disney are the same. In fact, historians have documented how Disney constructed and played a public "Walt Disney" at considerable odds with his private actions as boss and businessman. But these two shots and scenes, and the film in general, minimize the distance between the public and private Disney. For example, in a momentary deviation from the classical narrative conception of moving image as invisible narrating guest, it is as if viewers and the character of Travers had been invited into Walt's office as the nonfiction television camera appeared to have been the night before. On television Disney addresses the audience directly, looking directly into the camera, but this is a classical narrative scene in indirect address, with the camera as invisible guest. However, here Disney/Hanks looks almost directly into the camera at the opening of the scene, as the image composition implicitly imitates the television image in the previous scene. The rest of this scene proceeds in standard classical narrative style.



One of the first shots in the scene, shown previously, sets Walt Disney against the wall of his public awards. Then, as he and P.L. Travers converse a bit later in the scene, this shot shows them against a wall apparently adjoining the background of the previous shot. But whereas the previous office shot imitated the public, television image of Disney, this more private shot frames a drawing of Disney's daughter Diane between him and Travers. Disney explains that he wants to make *Mary Poppins* because he promised his daughters he would do so, and a father never breaks a promise to his children, right? He asks Travers if she has a family, and she uncharacteristically stumbles with her answer, symptomatically beginning to reveal the Disney version of their contrasting family experiences that will become central to the film's narrative.

Thus the overlapping background space in this scene not only stabilizes the narrative space through the 180 degree rule, but it also enables a continuous visual commentary on the foreground action. Viewers can see how literally close the private Disney (family picture) is to the public Disney (Oscars and other awards), and how within the Disney universe, Walt's motives begin with family. The film's mise-en-scene sometimes resembles an illustrated promotional lecture, with the background visually supporting the foreground narrative conversation and action.

13. In the continuity editing style that seems to stabilize space within the classical narrative system, one of the key conventions is the 180 degree rule. An invisible line is drawn between the major figures in the scene, and the camera usually stays on one side of this line. This insures some common background space from shot to shot, allowing viewers to quickly orient themselves and thus focus their attention on the characters. As analytic editing and matches on action smoothly take viewers closer and closer to the characters, the style invites them to see the film as the continuous actions and emotions of the characters rather than as a discontinuous series of shots (and sounds).



14. Emma Thompson vividly incarnates the starchy and imperious P.L. Travers, in her performance often bringing nuance and complex shadings missing elsewhere in the film.

Here the character looks down her nose in mixed pity and wonder at the benighted U.S. soul who imagines that Dick van Dyke, cast as Bert the chimney sweep in Disney's *Mary Poppins*, might be like Olivier or Gielgud, "one of the greats."



15. In an overhead shot of her that evening in bed, Travers/Thompson shows more vulnerability, developing and deepening the narrative pattern of flashbacks triggered by the day's discussion of the script. Flashbacks will thus be revealed as revelatory of painful episodes from her childhood. The film's style and narrative takes viewers more and more deeply into the character's imaginary subjectivity. As she murmurs "Responsible," another narrative hook, motif or symptom, there is a quick dissolve into....



16. ...Travers' memory image in this overhead shot of the young Helen Goff. The shot visually matches or rhymes with the similar descending camera movement and composition in the opening sequence, designed to invite alert viewers to compare this brown and arid landscape unfavorably with the green garden landscape in that opening sequence.

The family's declining fortunes can be economically measured through this comparison. Style and technique both support narrative (establishing a new scene) and develop thematic meaning (the made-up word "responsible" triggers her memory, but why?).



18. Like many contemporary Hollywood films appropriating techniques associated with the international art cinema, the film's time in this sequence moves fluidly between past and present. A flashback that began with Travers in bed at night ends with this 1961 image of the tall palm trees that remind her of Australia, an image that then...



20. The culmination of this sequence is a peak moment in the young Helen's idolizing her father. A romance, with father and daughter riding the white horse in slow motion and haloing light with vaguely perverse sexual overtones, establishes the idealized memory of Travers Goff, namesake of P.L. Travers, which must be saved through the figure of Mr. Banks.

17. Whereas the camera movement in the opening ends with a cut to the adult Travers in her London home, then later returns to the young Helen Goff making her miniature house of sticks and leaves, here the descending camera movement is completed, with Helen making another house in this inhospitable location. And again her father approaches, this time on the family's white horse, enchanting her once more with his fanciful but irrespons(t)ible tales.



19. ...in a cut is marked retroactively, and somewhat ambiguously, as Travers' point of view out the limousine window. The character's narrative arc also begins its movement in Thompson's performance as Travers starts privately to soften.



21. As Travers' memories of her father reach a romantic peak in the past, she confronts Walt Disney in the present with her most arbitrary demand, that there be no red in the film. This seems to signal that her memories increasingly influence her present actions.

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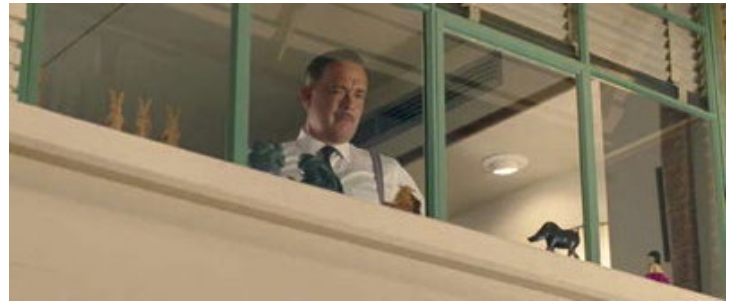
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22. Whereas Travers' biographer points out that the historical Travers had already signed over most of the rights to Mary Poppins before she arrived in Los Angeles, would sign over more before she left, and signed over still more later, the film greatly exaggerates whatever power she had over the script and production.[2][[open endnotes in new window](#)] Disney apparently largely ignored most of her suggestions and demands since he likely knew or suspected how much she needed money at this point. But here Disney and his writers are frustrated by her control, and he assents to her unreasonable demand because she has not yet signed over the rights.



23. After this conflict, a high angle long shot of Travers on a bench outside the Disney office building, waiting alone for her limousine. This shot is then retrospectively identified as Disney's point of view...



24. ...by the next shot of him looking out his office window, which appears to be reassuringly close to the rehearsal room. Disney begins to assume the role of investigator into Travers, increasingly assuming control of the narrative as he learns what viewers already know, and more.



25. Travers' memories take the past narrative further into her family's conflicts, as her father here presents her mother with a pear while young Helen looks on. The scene in part answers the narrative question posed when the adult Travers throws the pears out her hotel room door into the swimming pool. Now viewers can infer that Travers still associates pears with her childhood unhappiness—perhaps her father's irresponsibility in leaving work early or her jealousy of her mother.



26. Tom Hanks evokes Walt Disney's mythic ability to experience as a child as he hears the song "A Spoonful of Sugar" for the first time.

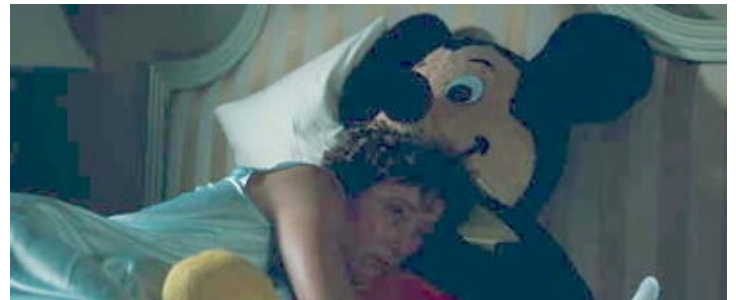


27. Why the adult Travers doesn't like the word "responsible," coined by Disney's writers. Her beloved father liked to play with words, too, but he was also irresponsible. Here the young Helen Goff witnesses her father's humiliation, nearly fired from his bank job and told by his boss to "be responsible!" Much of the film's narrative involves viewers and Walt Disney using the skills of popular psychology, tracing her adult symptoms back to childhood traumas such as this one.



28. In addition to a psychologized, bad-tempered, and snooty aversion to Disneyfication of her Mary Poppins stories, Travers' adult symptoms include insomnia, lots of pills, and esoteric (Buddhist?) statues referencing the historical Travers' interest in mysticism and the spiritual teachings of G.I. Gurdjieff.

Here, after remembering her father's humiliation and her own disillusionment in him, Travers touches her pill bottles, then gets out of bed to...



29. ...bring back a truer friend, the large stuffed toy Mickey Mouse she had on her arrival banished to the corner ("until you learn the art of subtlety"), continuing her private accommodation to the Disney magic.

The historical Travers never made any such accommodation. Though for publicity purposes she and Disney endured their "uneasy wedlock" (her words), after his 1966 death she was more publicly critical of his Mary Poppins film and his company's products generally.[3]

30. While Travers is learning to love Mickey Mouse, Disney sits on the same bench where she had sat earlier, contemplating her resistance to him. But whereas the shot of her visually emphasized her solitude, here the scene performs his sensitivity and human connectedness. He hears the sound of Richard Sherman playing the piano from the rehearsal room above, turns to listen and then gets up to go upstairs.

This shot is part of a repeated pattern in the film which connects Disney's office, the rehearsal room where conflict is played out, and the space just outside the building with the bench on the lawn, a space into which Travers had thrown the script earlier that day to dramatize its weightlessness.

Thus the diegetic or story space connects indoor and outdoor locations. Visually, as the very foundation of viewers' narrative comprehension, cinematic space establishes the Disney studio as



This is one of many ways continuity editing and the classical narrative system can build unexamined assumptions and values into the way stories are told.

a place where the empathetic boss is literally and figuratively close to his workers, and the whole workplace has a casual human connectedness to it, starting with the famous man himself.

31. Now Disney sits next to Richard Sherman at the piano as Sherman plays “Feed the Birds (Tuppence a Bag),” a sad song from *Mary Poppins*. As the narrative and dramatic conflict rises and we approach the film’s midpoint, not only does the character of Walt Disney contemplate an intervention to save his film (in this, the Disney version, not historically), but new genre elements begin to appear as well.

If the 1961 story has so far been a backstage comedy-drama about a show (Disney’s *Mary Poppins*) struggling to emerge from its author’s tragic and melodramatic past, then at this point the 1961 story of *Saving Mr. Banks* struggles to become a backstage musical about putting on a show, about the birth pangs of a musical comedy that many viewers already cherish. And *Saving Mr. Banks* exists in part to refurbish and re-commodify that love, activating affection for *Mary Poppins* among older viewers and re-introducing it to younger generations along with the accompanying Disney mythology about its own history.

So as Disney and Sherman commiserate with one another about how Travers is wrecking their plans, the song Sherman performs and Disney loves no longer refers just to conflicts among some characters created by Travers, but reflexively to their own situation as they see it. Disney jokes to Sherman that the “bitter pill” in his lyrics refers to “someone we know,” meaning Travers. Travers’ biographer says that Disney swallowed Travers’ *Mary Poppins* “whole, as a shark takes a minnow,”[4] and *Saving Mr. Banks* performs that incorporation, but it wants viewers to celebrate the corporation’s victory.

The film’s hybrid of genre elements begins to include the reflexive, self-justifying musical genre[5] as it celebrates Disney’s appropriation of *Mary Poppins* from Travers. As the story in a classic backstage musical like *Dames* or *Singin’ in the Rain* approaches maximum conflict, the show and the film about the show partially merge, and something similar happens here. Viewers are invited to collapse the distance between themselves, the performers putting on a show, and the film about those performers.[6]



Reflexivity has often been used for critical or progressive ends, to reveal the operations of text and social formation, as in Brecht or Godard. But here, as in most musicals, it is used conservatively, to divert attention from such operations, working to align viewers as smoothly and imperceptibly as possible with Disney and his writers who must save their film.

The reflexive self-justification of the classic musical proceeds partly through the performers’ empathy, and here the attribution of empathy to Walt Disney becomes narratively central. Disney, always positive, empathizes with Travers because he remembers being in her situation (“I fought this battle from her side”), the little guy up against a powerful producer who wants to buy your creation – in his case, Mickey Mouse. This representation of Disney makes him a true man of the people whom he entertains, and he recognizes his commonality with Travers: “It woulda killed me to give [Mickey] up,” and “The mouse is family,” this last echoing Travers’ earlier comment: “[*Mary Poppins*] is family, you know.”



32. As P.L. Travers’ internal conflict increases, she becomes lost in thoughts of the past, no longer commanding the narrative with her personal goals. This sequence builds those conflicts to a dramatically orchestrated climax in image and sound, with rapid intercutting between past and present. The film constructs “her” subjective state as caught between her memories and what’s going on around her.

Here, in foreground, Travers remembers the source of the song, “Fidelity Fiduciary Bank,” that the writers are singing in satirical style in the background, as in Disney’s *Mary Poppins*. But viewers are temporarily invited to empathize with her, since as so often in the film, the song evokes painful memories of her

father's alcoholism, hatred of his job at the bank, and romantic irresponsibility.

33. The Disney writers' satirical frenzy unknowingly evokes the frenzy of Travers Goff speaking on behalf of the bank from the stage at a country fair. In front of his precious daughter and wife, his boss and much of the town, and yelling the words he hates to say, he is, as remembered by his grown daughter, mocked by the writers' interpretation of her own creation, Mr. Banks.

The film ironically matches the father's furious voice and performance with that of the writers' singing: "...directors invest as propriety demands."

Unfortunately, in moving directly back and forth between Travers' father's words and the Disney song, the film elides Travers' own work as it does throughout. The film reflexively justifies her marginalization in Disney history.



In turning Travers' stories into nothing but the neutral transcription of her own childhood experiences, seen in the film's extensive flashbacks, which are then creatively transformed by Disney and his team, the film erases her contributions, suggests she's unoriginal.



34. In this overhead shot of Travers Goff lying on the ground beside the stage where he has fallen drunk in front of everyone, the youthful Helen Goff's trauma is crystallized, her family's public humiliation complete and its downfall foretold. This narrative encourages viewers to read it psychologically for sources of the adult Travers' behavioral symptoms in 1961.



35. And such a symptom appears right on cue with Travers, usually distant, imperious and playing the only grownup in the room, now dissolving into childlike pleading to the writers as she flees the room: "Why do you have to make him [Mr. Banks] so cruel? I'll feel like I've let him down again."



36. Why does she think she let him down? Because as she is at her father's deathbed, he rejects her poem because she didn't bring him a bottle, so she immediately goes in search of a bottle to win his approval.



37. The past now fully determining her actions, an adult regressed to childhood, the fully psychologized Travers searches the lawn near the bench for leaves and twigs with which to build a house (security) like the ones earlier scenes showed her making as a child. Ralph, the limousine driver sitting nearby, notices her and comes over.



This shot-reverse shot sequence establishes a new closeness with someone she had previously spurned. She now understands that his preference for the sun over the rain is not mindless optimism, but good weather allows his daughter to be outside. She now understands that while to her the line, “A leisurely stroll is a gift,” was associated with the personal pain of her father’s duplicity in pretending the family was walking to the train station in Maryborough out of choice rather than his lack of carriage fare, this same seemingly mundane phrase means something quite different to Ralph and his daughter. She begins to learn to empathize, like Ralph and like Walt Disney and his writers.

38. Intercut with her memory image of her younger self finding a bottle for her father, Travers accepts a cup of tea from Ralph and, self-absorbed, begins to listen to him talk about his daughter who’s in a wheelchair.

Many reviewers couldn’t understand what the character Ralph was doing in this film, but he’s a crucial figure, since he functions here as an average guy. Like Walt he’s a simple, straightforward person without irony, the model Disney consumer, an independent corroborator of Walt’s mission statement, evidence for Walt’s arguments.



39. In the reverse shot, tacitly knitting the space together for focus on character subjectivity, Travers responds to Ralph with new humility and chagrin. Others have bigger problems than hers, and theirs are right now. Ralph moves her toward a new empathy, which anticipates the more powerful influence of Disney on her character arc a few scenes later.



40. In this long shot of Travers and Ralph on the lawn, she pours tea into a little river she’s dug in the lawn next to her playhouse. This act seems motivated by the memory in the next flashback, in which she saves her mother from drowning herself in the river near their house. Perhaps Travers is beginning to learn to forgive herself for her imagined responsibility for her father’s death, and Disney will ask her to do so.

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41. Disney calls Travers at her hotel, asking her, “What do I have to do to make you happy?” Since she currently can’t be happy, she hangs up on him.

42. Disney walks into the rehearsal room, saying, “Boys, we’ve gotta fix this.” This line signals Disney’s full assumption of narrational agency in order to save his film, including a series of narrative ellipses. The narrative so far has been relatively unrestricted, with viewers generally knowing more than any of the characters. However, as Disney takes control of it, the narrative becomes selectively more restrictive. He takes actions that viewers don’t learn about until they happen, such as taking Travers to Disneyland and (implicitly) moving the writers to make Mr. Banks less cruel to the children. Whereas the historical Disney did little or nothing to respond to Travers’ “consultations,” here Disney becomes her paternal therapist.



43. Following directly after Disney tells his writers that “we’ve gotta fix this [Travers’ obstructions],” a flashback shows Aunt Ellie arriving at the Goff’s home, here seen initially through a curtained window from inside. The shot resembles a shot of the Goff family on their first arrival and another one at the end, when the film returns to the family home as the adult Travers forgives in imagination her younger self. These three shots at key moments, framed through the curtained window of the family home, carry emotional associations projected from the protagonist to viewers.



The shots form a significant stylistic pattern in this film, along with other images that link indoor and outdoor spaces through windows, doors, porches and other openings. These frame-within-frame images, often spatially juxtaposing inside spaces of family, home and security with outdoor, less secure spaces, include the shots of the young and the adult Travers building play houses that express her insecurities about home and family. They also include the interplay at the Disney studio between the rehearsal room and Disney’s office on the second floor and the outdoor space on the lawn just outside these windows.

The director of *Saving Mr. Banks*, John Lee Hancock, seems to have learned from the films of John Ford (and Sergio Leone) about activating the narrative and emotional associations of indoor and outdoor spaces when they are juxtaposed in shots framed through doors and windows.

As Disney takes over the narrative initiative, his injunction to “fix this” is followed by the arrival in the past of another fixer, the prototype of Mary Poppins, Aunt Ellie. Disney’s agency now triggers the flashbacks, which had previously been prompted by Travers, organized solely around the construction of her interiority.

In addition, in the intricate and shifting set of parallels the film sets up among characters in Australia, those in 1961, and those in both Travers’ and Disney’s *Mary Poppins*, viewers are now encouraged to see Walt Disney, like Aunt Ellie and Mary Poppins, as someone who arrives to save the family. The Walt Disney Company pays homage to its founder by paralleling him with its version of Mary Poppins. They both fix families if only in the patriarchal imagination. This film mythologizes as follows: “complete” families (Disney’s) make complete families, while “broken” families (Travers’) make broken families.

Equally important, after the film has followed for half its length the convention that flashbacks are motivated or explained as the memories of the protagonist, Travers, now the pattern changes.



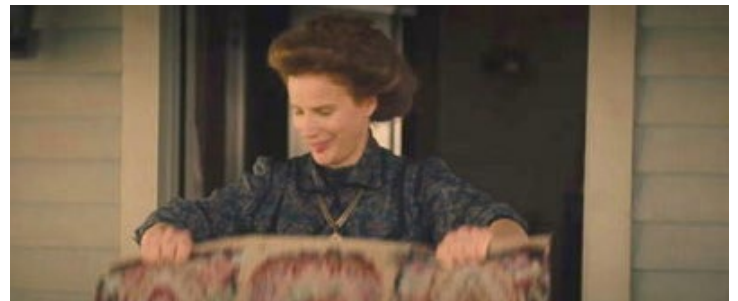
44. Aunt Ellie's arrival silhouettes her in the doorway, referencing Mary Poppins. The character of Aunt Ellie, plain and severe, resembles Travers' Mary Poppins more than she does Julie Andrews in the Disney version, but she nevertheless serves Disney here. Viewers who see this film are much more likely to have experienced Disney's film than Travers' books. *Saving Mr. Banks* minimizes Travers' creative accomplishments, presenting her conception of the stories largely as a direct transcription of her autobiographical experiences.



45. Viewers may be surprised to discover Disney's narrative agency only when Travers does, thus emphasizing the change in who's in charge. Disney asked Travers the night before what he had to do to make her happy. Here he answers his own question, now central to the film's narrative direction: he takes her to the happiest place on earth, Disneyland. In this shot Disney welcomes Travers at the front gate, and Tom Hanks' regular-guy image smoothly updates the Walt Disney Company's image of its founder. Period details such as the posters provide not only realist detail for most viewers but also fodder for Disney enthusiasts and trivia fans.



46. Disney takes Travers on the carousel, where he waves and enjoys himself as both child and leader, while she sits sternly in the background. Subsequent shots in this scene move into close-ups of Travers as she thinks again of her childhood, leading into the next flashback scene. Travers is no longer moving the 1961 narrative, but only motivating the flashbacks to a past narrative that has its own cause-and-effect continuity.



47. Illustrating that narrative continuity, Travers' memory seems to tell a story that follows the conventions of classical narrative. Here the flashback, showing Aunt Ellie leading the family in putting things right, picks up soon after the last flashback ended as she unpacked her carpet bag Mary-Poppins-style. In the film's psychologizing terms, Travers' flashbacks seem more and more to have a life of their own, to control her rather than the other way around.



48. As Travers thinks of her dying father, Da Gradi begins the scene by responding to her plea from the previous scene by agreeing not to make him so cruel. Implicitly prompted by Disney, the writers, joined by the receptionist, then perform rather than read the scene. The scene turns into a version of a backstage musical, with the 1961 characters trying to put on a show that Travers' past life and narrative is trying to prevent. It is as if, through the Disneyland carousel, this singing and dancing performance, and ultimately the world premiere of *Mary Poppins* itself, Disney and his studio are reflexively

justifying, both to Travers and to viewers, why Disney's *Mary Poppins* film had to be a musical.[6] [[open endnotes in new page](#)] In genre terms, a beloved musical struggles to be born out of a tragic family melodrama from the past.

49. Accepting the kite as token of their good will, Travers is drawn into the musical magic of their singing and dancing. They're saving Mr. Banks through the song, "Let's Go Fly a Kite." The previous day's song about bankers had seemed to mock her precious memories of her father, showing his romanticism as a weak defense against the performance demands of his capitalist bosses. Now this music affirms and redeems him, and she joins in, here dancing happily with Don, then singing enthusiastically around the piano with the communal group.



While Travers had earlier berated Disney for his escapism, for teaching children that their nanny brings magic to do their work for them, perhaps beneath this stern, grownup defender of discipline and realism is just a little girl who wants them to save her father. The Walt Disney Company takes this opportunity to try to reduce to the simplest version of childhood one of its more complicated public critics.

But the conflict masks a deeper agreement: Travers and Disney seem to agree that the problem with bankers is not their imperialism ("You see, Michael, you'll be part of / railways through Africa /...Plantations of ripening tea") but their soul-destroying stuffiness, inviting superficial satire. Bankers' obsession with money is more like bad manners, constantly talking about something impolite or embarrassing, than something as rude as human exploitation.



50. At this moment the major conflict within Travers, and between Travers and Disney, seems to be moving toward resolution. However, the narrative engages in a surprise delay of the inevitable conclusion since most of the audience knows that Disney's *Mary Poppins* will be made successfully. Nevertheless, even if viewers know the ending, the delay likely works to increase suspense and absorption with the narrative and characters.

On learning accidentally that Disney plans to use animated penguins when she had forbidden any "cartoons," Travers angrily confronts Disney and leaves without signing the rights contract which this film insists, against historical evidence, that he does not yet have.

The studio frequently used animation to insert Disney magic into its sometimes mundane live-action features. Critics sometimes attacked this practice as barbaric and impure, as if it were some kind of aesthetic miscegenation. So it becomes useful for Disney's self-justifying history of Disney to have Travers reject (though perhaps being in denial about her enjoyment of) animation mixed with live-action singing and dancing, since her rejection seems anachronistic today. Trying to psychologize and trivialize its critics, Disney uses its hegemonic power to partially neutralize and incorporate alternatives or opposition.

This narrative development is more than an arbitrary delay, though, since the mixture of live action and animation had been part of the Disney aesthetic since the twenties.



51. Travers is newly friendly with Ralph as he drops her at the airport. The conflict within the protagonist has evolved to the point where, though she has denounced Disney and is returning to London, the character arc is prepared for the final initiative by Disney to (virtually) complete her therapy and save Mr. Banks, her father. She gives Ralph empathetic gifts for him and his wheelchair-bound daughter, and she makes an empathetic joke about Disney.

52. Puzzled by the name Helen Goff on her airline ticket, Disney asks, “Who is Helen Goff? Have we been talking to the wrong person?” These questions about her identity increase his role as narrative investigator and mover of events. They set up the next big scene of revelation. The extensive flashbacks have provided viewers with more information to answer these questions than any of the characters have, but Disney will now catch up and pass viewers in narrative knowledge and insight.

This is accomplished through narrative ellipses: through a convention of classical narrative, ellipses temporarily restrict or withhold narrative knowledge of the hero’s actions from viewers in order to build suspense for the big reveal or climax.



53. The young Helen Goff returns to tell her father, dropping the pears he asked for. But he is dead. She has disappointed him again, and even Aunt Ellie, her own Mary Poppins, can’t fix this trauma. The flashback narrative has been synchronized with the 1961 narrative so that this low point, the worst of Travers’ childhood, occurs just before Disney will put everything in a new perspective for her. Like Ralph, he will demonstrate that some people’s lives have been more difficult than hers.

54, 55. Disney follows Travers to London and presents her with a long, empathetic monologue about fathers, using his new narrative knowledge and legendary human insight. The scene is shot in standard shot-reverse shot style, with Disney usually backed by a Buddhist (?) statue with its arm raised as if in blessing. Travers is increasingly moved by his words, as in this shot of her late in the scene, holding herself, shaken by his tale. One critic said of the film, “it would be unfair to dismiss [it] as an exercise in corporate self-promotion. It’s more of a mission statement.”[7][[open notes in new window](#)] The monologue is the emotional heart of this Disney mission statement, so I have transcribed it here:



“Disney: You see I have my own Mr. Banks. Mine had a mustache.

Travers: So not true that Disney created man in his own image. Disney, chuckling: No, no, it is true that you created yourself in someone else’s. Yes? (Pause) Ever been to Kansas City? Do you know Missouri at all?

Travers: I can’t say I do.

Disney: Well, it is mighty cold there in the winters, bitter cold. My dad, Elias Disney, he owned a newspaper delivery route there. A thousand papers twice daily, a morning and an evening



edition, and dad was a tough business man, he was a save-a-penny-anywhere-you-can type of fellow, so he wouldn't employ delivery boys, no, no, no, he used me and my big brother Roy.

I was, ah, eight back then, just eight years old, and like I said, winters are harsh and old Elias, well he didn't believe in new shoes until the old ones were worn through. Honestly, Mrs. Travers, the snowdrifts sometimes were up (gestures over his head) over my head and we'd push through that snow like it was molasses, cold and wet seeping through our clothes and our shoes, skin peeling from our faces, and sometimes I'd find myself sunk down in that snow. Just waking up, cause I must have passed out or something, I don't know.

Then, well, it was time for school, and I was too cold, too wet to figure out equations and things and then it was right back out in the snow again to get home just before dark. Mother would feed us dinner and then it was time to go right back out and do it again for the evening edition.

(In mother's voice) You best be quick there, Walt, you better get those newspapers up on that porch and under that storm door, papa's gonna lose his temper again and show you the buckle end of his belt.

Now, I don't, I don't tell you this to make you sad, Mrs. Travers. I don't. I love my life. I think it is a miracle. I love my dad. He was a wonderful man, but rare is the day wherein I don't think about that eight year old boy delivering newspapers in the snow and old Elias Disney with that strap in his fist. And I am just so tired, Mrs. Travers, I'm tired of remembering it that way.

Aren't you tired, too, Mrs. Travers? Now we all have our sad tales but don't you want to finish the story? Let it all go and have a life that isn't dictated by the past? It's not the children she comes to save, it's their father. It's your father, Travers Goff.



Hanks'/Disney's speech mixes secular and religious tropes, blending a particular white American kind of sales pitch with its Protestant roots. Walt begins by powerfully evoking the

Travers: I don't know what you think you know about me, Walter.

Disney: You must have loved and admired him a lot to take his name.

Travers: I...

Disney: It's him that this is all about, is it, all of it, everything. (Pause) Forgiveness, Mrs. Travers, it's what I learned from your books.

Travers: I don't have to forgive my father. He was a wonderful man.

Disney: No, no, you need to forgive Helen Goff. (Pause) Life is a harsh sentence to lay down for yourself. Give her to me, Mrs. Travers. Trust me with your precious *Mary Poppins*. I won't disappoint you. I swear that every time a person walks in to a movie house in Leicester Square or Kansas City, you will see George Banks being saved. They will love him as kids. They will weep for his cares. They will wring their hands when he loses his job, and when he flies that kite, oh, Mrs. Travers, they will rejoice. They will sing. In movie houses all over the world in the eyes and hearts of my kids and other kids and mothers and fathers for generations to come, George Banks will be honored. George Banks will be redeemed. George Banks and all he stands for will be saved. Maybe not in life, but in imagination. This is what we storytellers do. We restore order with imagination. We instill hope again and again and again. So trust me, Mrs. Travers. Let me prove it to you. I give you my word."

56, 57. Delivered with all the formidable sincerity, gravitas and command of American regional accents that Tom Hanks has brought to similar big speeches in *Philadelphia*, *Saving Private Ryan* and other films, this monologue becomes a powerful brand builder, ideal for all potential Disney customers and employees as well as stockholder and sales meetings and other inspirational gatherings.

Viewers learn that it has convinced Travers immediately after, in a fluid right to left tracking shot, revealing through a doorway Travers sitting across from the large stuffed Mickey Mouse doll she has brought from Los Angeles, now signing the rights contract with Disney, resolving the interior conflict that has been narratively central to the film.

Of course this cannot happen in real life but only in imagination since storytellers restore the existing order with imagination, ratify the status quo with their art. Storytellers cannot address or

sufferings of his youth. Against these, the difficulties of Travers' young life, in which her memories have immersed us at great length, may seem minor by comparison. Life may be a vale of tears, but Walt has chosen to put these sufferings in the past.

Movie houses all over the world become U.S. churches from Walt's youth where fathers and mothers and children, modeled on U.S. families, will be redeemed. And Disney's movies will spread this U.S. gospel of happiness, optimism, and family harmony, with global audiences as churchgoers weeping, wringing their hands, rejoicing, and singing. The patriarch is redeemed, returned to the place of honor from which the feminists and the liberals and the Communists have toppled him.



58. In her London home, now in 1964, Travers is relaxed and casual, in a bright housedress and writing again, newly prosperous from Disney funds, and newly friendly with her maid and her agent.

solve real problems, as Travers' *Mary Poppins* does, and even as Disney's version of Travers advocates. They show us how to escape from those problems into an imaginary order, instilling a hope that must constantly be repeated since its source is the repression of any confrontation with the real problems of the world. "Imagination, in other words, is a form of repression. Joy is a kind of denial." [8]



59. At the 1964 world premiere of Disney's *Mary Poppins* at Grauman's Chinese Theater in Hollywood, Travers is alone and largely ignored. The entire film has, in a sense, been a narrative justification for why Disney doesn't invite her to the premiere until she shows up, since, as he puts it, "I've got to protect the picture" from her potentially negative comments to the press. So Travers again finds a friend in Mickey Mouse, who offers her his arm to walk into the theater.

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60. On screen in *Mary Poppins*, Dick van Dyke dances with animated penguins, and the premiere audience loves it. A huge triumph for Disney, his writers and animators, but...



61. ...sitting with Disney's writers and in front of Disney, Travers seems to be the only one in the theater not enjoying the mixture of live action and animation, the element which she had denounced so vehemently and for which she had nearly shut down the production. She covers her mouth as if to avoid getting caught up in the enthusiastic happiness of the crowd around her, yet the point is clear: Disney is right and she's wrong, since if most people like it, it's good.

62. On screen, Julie Andrews as Mary Poppins says to the children, "Sometimes someone you love can't see the nose in front of their face." Travers' characters have now become fully Disney's, psychologically as well as legally, and now speak back to her through Disney. The historical Disney told Travers that he knew more about Mary Poppins than she did, and this fictional scene dramatizes that claim.[9]



63. Travers' reaction to this line indicates that she takes it as applying directly to her, and she begins to sob. She becomes the model viewer of a classical narrative film, so absorbed in the narrative that she takes it as addressed directly to her personally, as if she were the only viewer.



64. On screen, Dick van Dyke, whom Travers had denigrated, as Bert defends Mr. Banks to his children, saying, "He really does love you."



65. Travers, sobbing more deeply now, wipes her tears, signifying that subjectively the difference between her real father and Disney's Mr. Banks has collapsed. Disney is saving Mr. Banks, keeping his promise not only to his own daughters but also to her, his symbolic daughter.



66. Travers' memory image of the house where her father died is shot like others that frame outdoor spaces through windows or doors, evoking home and security juxtaposed with outside spaces. But the house is now empty, with only the curtain moving in the breeze, indicating that she is starting to say goodbye, and forgive herself.



67. In implicit continuation of the indoor shot shown above, a long shot of two female riders, silhouetted, arriving in the yard on the family's white horse.



68. In medium shot at father's bedside, young Helen places a full bottle in her father's unmoving hand, further indicating that she can forgive herself for giving him the alcohol that might have helped kill him.



69. A memory image of Travers' psychological reconciliation: young Helen and her father embrace at the bank, scene of his humiliation.

70. Onscreen in *Mary Poppins*, Mr. Banks walks away, alone. But the image is no longer framed by the stage curtain as in the previous onscreen images from the premiere of *Mary Poppins*. Now we are watching *Mary Poppins*, apparently unmediated by any diegetic space in *Saving Mr. Banks*. The two films have momentarily merged. Occurring at the emotional climax of *Saving Mr. Banks*, this effect both models and tries to produce what Roger Ebert called "the out-of-body experience" one has at a good narrative film, when viewers are no longer sitting at the edge of the narrative space. Rather, they are inside it, completely given over to the illusion of having their story questions asked and answered in effortless sequence, their needs for closeness to



characters, omnipresence, voyeurism, and emotional justice activated and seemingly fulfilled. Here the film attempts to collapse the distance among the films *Mary Poppins* and *Saving Mr. Banks*, the imaginary subjectivity of Travers, and the very real subjectivity of viewers watching *Saving Mr. Banks*. That is, if *Mary Poppins* is the love (and sales) object of *Saving Mr. Banks*, then this is the point when the subject (or its human viewer) is supposed to merge with its object. Viewers may experience a desire to see *Mary Poppins*, and the sale is made.



71. In close-up, Travers is now crying uncontrollably, her critical distance and haughty manner now collapsed, humbled by the power of Disney's psychologizing vision and the redemption of both her father and herself.

72. Disney, sitting behind Travers, tries to comfort her: "He [her father] is gonna be OK."
Travers, crying: "I can't abide cartoons."

73. Onscreen but, like the image of Mr. Banks above, full screen, the cues for our complete identification with narrative and characters in both films continue at full throttle. And this happens as *Saving Mr. Banks* becomes, like *Mary Poppins*, a musical, a genre increasingly associated with Disney. Only the musical can adequately celebrate Mr. Banks' redemption, since the musical involves a break in narrative plausibility as characters sing and dance their feelings, reflexively celebrating the musical genre itself.

Here the promise of the earlier scene in the rehearsal room, its hopeful rhythm blocked by Travers' sudden angry departure, is fulfilled in the completed musical number. Disney's Mr. Banks and all his family sing and dance "Let's Go Fly a Kite" around the house, then out the door and down the street. As Disney had promised Travers, her father is saved, released in imagination from the dreadful world of the bank that had weighed so heavily and repetitively on his romantic soul in her Disneyfied memories.



The historical Travers did indeed cry at the premiere, but because she hated what Disney had done to her stories, not because Disney had saved her father's memory. Yet this scene, along with Disney's expression a moment later (you can't make some people happy), maintains that Travers was in denial over how deeply moved she was by his film, that her objection to animation was only a cover for her embarrassment over her tearful identification with the film.[10]





74. Reprising peak father-daughter moments: Travers' self-forgiveness is now signified by the relentlessly affirmative associations of her memories, here exemplified by the slow-motion horse ride in the golden Australian sunset, the young Helen Goff glowing with angelic light.



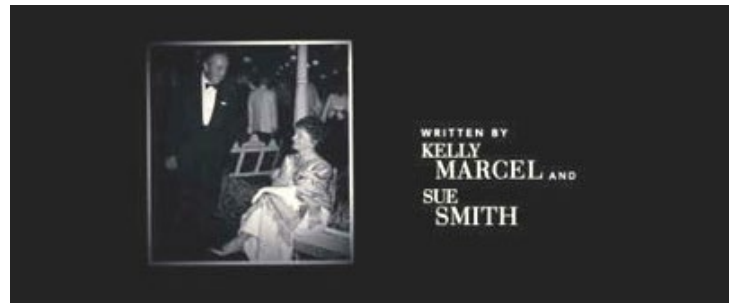
75. Travers is still in tears, but smiling now as Disney's universal Mr. Banks is fully transformed back into her personal experience, modeling the viewer of classical narrative as satisfied individual consumer.



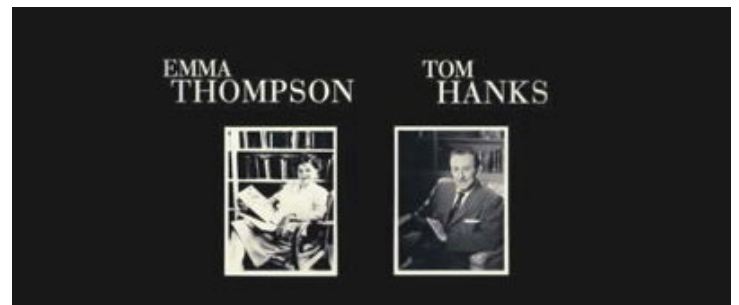
76. Travers' point of view of her father on his deathbed. She says goodbye not to Mr. Banks from *Mary Poppins*, but to what *Saving Mr. Banks* posits as her real father. He smiles back in recognition, reprising previous shots but now with a forgiving and happy ending.



77. Final narrative closure and emotional justice, a stylistic reversal of and rhyme with the opening scene. Where the first overhead crane shot descended to find young Helen alone, here the similar shot ascends in benediction as father and daughter embrace against the Maryborough lawn. As elsewhere in classical narrative, technique and style serve narrative and character, functioning to advance the story and immerse viewers in the interiority of the characters, here by cuing comparison of beginning and ending through symmetrical camera movements.



78. Beginning of the closing credit sequence. This has been a Disney movie for grownups about the making of one of the most successful Disney movies. Lest anyone think that Disney magic or sleight of hand is at work here, Disney has lots of historical artifacts from the Disney archives on display in the credit sequence, to conclude its case for the authenticity of this mission statement and imply (falsely) that what you've been watching is based in such documentary evidence. Accompanying the writers' credits here is a black and white photo of the historical Disney and Travers together, apparently at the *Mary Poppins* premiere, smiling for the camera.



79. More documentary evidence that the real Travers was just as mean, pretentious and outrageous as her portrayal in the film you've just seen. Don Da Gradi's fictional version in *Saving Mr. Banks* is seen sketching, so that through several of his acerbic drawings the Disney case against Travers is supposedly anchored in historical authenticity.

What we're seeing is the writers' frustrations, expressed in justifiable satire, at having to absorb Travers' justifiable frustrations at needing Disney's money but hating the Disneyfication of her work. Travers' biographer says that Disney went off to his ranch while Travers met with the writers, who had no power to change anything.

In effect, Disney allowed his employees to absorb her abuse while he escaped the more or less staged conflict, since he largely ignored Travers' "consultations."^[11][\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) But you'll never see that in a Disney movie, fiction or nonfiction.

80. More credits: Emma Thompson's name over a picture of Pamela Travers, and Tom Hanks' name over a picture of Walt Disney. Now we know what the real people looked like, we can further confuse them with the stars who play them.



81. An overhead close-up of the vintage tape recorder that both the historical and fictional Travers demanded in order to record all her consultations with Disney's writers in 1961. The tapes and transcriptions are in the Disney archives, and transcriptions also with Travers' papers in New South Wales, Australia. The final credit sequence shows this image while the sound-over seems to be the historical Travers' voice, directing the writers, providing a patina of documentary authenticity, or "truthiness." The image is also used behind the DVD/Blu-Ray menu of *Saving Mr. Banks*, but this time with Emma Thompson's voice.

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Saving Mr. Banks and building Mr. Brand: the Walt Disney Company in the era of corporate personhood

by [Mike Budd](#)

Starring Tom Hanks and Emma Thompson and released by the Walt Disney Company to theaters around the world in late 2013 and early 2014, *Saving Mr. Banks* cost around \$35 million and by April 2014 had earned more than \$112 million in theatrical rentals worldwide.[1][[open endnotes in new window](#)] Directed by John Lee Hancock (*The Blind Side*) from a script by Kelly Marcel (*Fifty Shades of Grey*, 2015) and Sue Smith, the film presents the Disney version of the making of one of Disney's most successful and cherished films, *Mary Poppins* (1964), starring Julie Andrews and Dick Van Dyke.

In March 1961, P.L. Travers (Emma Thompson), the English (originally Australian) author of the *Mary Poppins* stories on which the Disney film will be loosely based, comes to Los Angeles to meet with Walt Disney (Tom Hanks), the scriptwriter, Don Da Gradi, and the songwriters Richard and Robert Sherman. She needs money, since her books are no longer selling and she isn't writing more, but she hates the idea that her books will be trivialized, "turned into one of his silly little cartoons." Stubbornly and unreasonably objecting to every creative interpretation, large and small, by the Disney team, Travers finally returns to London two weeks later, having refused to sign over the rights.

However, the difficult negotiations have dredged up the sources of her *Mary Poppins* stories in memories of her childhood traumas in early twentieth century rural Australia. Much of *Saving Mr. Banks* focuses on Travers' humble childhood as Helen Goff, daughter of a romantic, alcoholic father (and partial model for Mr. Banks in her stories and the film) and suicidal mother. In addition, Travers has been moved by talking with her chauffeur in Los Angeles, Ralph (Paul Giamatti), whose daughter is in a wheelchair. Walt Disney follows Pamela Travers back to London, where he persuades her to

trust him with her precious creation, and she finally signs over the rights. The film ends with the world premiere of *Mary Poppins* some three years later, where Travers weeps cathartically, Disney having kept his promise to save in imagination her father, Mr. Banks.

In many ways *Saving Mr. Banks* is a predictably ordinary commercial film, constructed according to the conventional narrative practices of most Hollywood films and made by a company that is known for its conservative business practices, family-friendly products, social conformity and merchandising tie-ins. Indeed, in characteristic Disney fashion, the film's theatrical release was carefully timed to coincide with the wide release of the 50th Anniversary Edition of the DVD/Blu-Ray of *Mary Poppins* and various other cross-promotional events at Disney theme parks and elsewhere so that the two films, new and old, could not only sell themselves but also constitute powerful advertisements for one another and many ancillary Disney products as well.[2]

However, *Saving Mr. Banks* is revealing not only for its familiar elements but for its unusual ones: it is a Disney film about the making of a Disney film, and stars Tom Hanks, perhaps the most trusted star in the U.S., as the eponymous founder of the company. The Walt Disney Company is, on the one hand, a global media and entertainment conglomerate, #61 on the 2014 Fortune 500 list, with revenues of \$45 billion and profits of \$6.1 billion.[3] On the other hand, the company is named after one man. Few if any multinational corporations have such a defining relation with their founder, and few have made it such a priority to create and cultivate a public image of that person for so long. Nicholas Sammond has argued, in fact, that beyond Mickey and Donald and all of the hundreds of other characters the Disney company has produced, the image and public persona of Walt Disney himself has been the corporation's most important product, the story of this self-made man "the company's most enduring tale." [4]

A mission statement

A.O. Scott writes in the *New York Times* that

"it would be unfair to dismiss this picture...as an exercise in corporate self-promotion. It's more of a mission statement." [5]

Why a feature film as mission statement, and why now? What can we learn about *Saving Mr. Banks* from studying The Walt Disney Company, and vice versa? Here I argue that distinctive characteristics of the film and the company that made it are reciprocally illuminating, that the peculiar role that this film plays for Disney at this historical moment gives it a particular resonance with the current political economy and ideology of this corporation and of capitalism today.

More specifically, for the first time since Walt and his brother Roy O. Disney got into the animation business nearly a century ago, no one from the Disney family participates in running the company. Roy E. Disney, the son of Roy O. and the nephew of Walt, had been the last family member actively involved on

the board of directors and in a top executive position, and he died in 2009 after helping to refocus and maintain the diversified firm's attention on feature animation as its central financial and creative force.[6] And on a symbolic level, *Saving Mr. Banks* bears, during its closing credit sequence, a dedication to Walt's only biological child, his daughter: "Dedicated to Diane Disney Miller, 1933-2013," who had died less than a month before the film's theatrical release.

More than a mere gesture, this dedication helps the film in its larger project of building the Disney brand, one of the most powerful and auratic in the world. The film represents Walt's intense desire to make a film of *Mary Poppins* less as a smart business decision and more as the result of a promise he made to his daughters some twenty years before:

"A man can't break a promise he's made to his daughters...That's what being a daddy is all about, is not breaking a promise...My motion picture is not just going to make my kids happy, it's going to make all kids happy."[7]

Since the film posits that it is precisely the failure of Pamela Travers' father to keep all his romantic promises of happiness that constitutes her childhood trauma and determined adult unhappiness, Walt's exemplary paternal behavior is set up to constitute a pointed contrast with that of her own father. (Although Travers' relationship with her father, who died when she was a child, marked her whole life, the film makes this relationship determining and central.)[8] This fictionalized contrast in father-daughter relationships becomes central to the film's narrative argument and the triumph of Walt Disney's conception of *Mary Poppins* over that of its original author, P.L. Travers.[9] More important, it also helps shore up a significant piece of the larger corporate myth of Walt Disney as a man whose business success was based less in calculation and persistence, let alone the hard work of his employees, than in his simple and innocent desire to extend to children everywhere the pleasures of storytelling and fantasy that he shared with his own children. Walt Disney's persona represents a huge, impersonal, multinational corporation that depends on public perceptions and has built its reputation for quality in significant part on the guarantee that its globally-recognized brand signifies that parents everywhere can trust their children with its products. So the legitimation of a personal, parent-child relationship between its founder and his children as the imaginary core and inspiration for all the company produces is something you can take to the bank.[10]

Disney's histories of Disney: a man and his corporation

At this moment, when the family ties to the ultimate family corporation are broken, there's value in a brand builder and mission statement like *Saving Mr. Banks*. The film along with the other films discussed below symbolically reconnects the diversified global Disney empire, now projecting its private power into multiple public domains, to its originating father and patriarchal family as the source of its supposedly universal appeal. In a sense, the film is a culmination of a series of smaller films, three documentaries and a cartoon,

distributed recently by the studio, which present the Disney version of its own corporate history: *The Pixar Story* (2007), *Walt & El Grupo* (2008), *Waking Sleeping Beauty* (2010), and *Get a Horse!* (2013). The company has always tried to control its own history by making films, television programs, books and other Disney products reflexively telling behind-the-scenes promotional stories which resemble its other stories, but these films may be seen as a small but significant new approach to this control.

In the tumultuous years from 1984 to 2005, Michael Eisner expanded and diversified the company beyond its existing product base, but he also brought Hollywood-style executive excess and spotlight-hogging public melodrama to a company built on its conservative family reputation. In addition to an egotistical inability to work with anyone who might threaten his position, he also appeared to be using his power to construct an image for himself as the sweet and avuncular new Walt Disney. His successor in 2005, Robert Iger, adopted a lower, more subdued profile seen as more appropriate to the Disney image, not attempting to appropriate the Disney family and corporation's reputation for himself.[11] Wall Street approves of Iger's performance, and the first of his acquisitions, Pixar in 2006, is the subject of the first of these films. Thus, whether directly approved by Iger or not, the films can be seen as reasserting the conventional wisdom of the corporation's historical connections to its charismatic founder and to quality animation generally after a period in which usurpers attempted to appropriate the value of those connections.

The three documentaries and a cartoon short have an edgier, less conformist appeal than the usual Disney product. They reveal a still marginal dimension of the company's culture that—under the influence of a new generation of animators and marketers, prominently including those from Pixar—attempts to keep up with social and cultural changes that threaten to leave a stodgy Disney company behind. On the other hand, these films follow and expand on the company's distinctive and longtime practice of treating everything the studio produces as a commodity designed to be fragmented and recombined into new commodities in other media, texts and platforms.

Much of the company's success is built on constructing cute, appealing and fungible modular units of character traits, visual narratives and songs. Organized into live-action and animated feature films, these commodified units can then be dismantled into their constituent modules, sold as toys, clothing, books, music and other merchandise as well as reassembled into other contexts as online or other media segments. They can also be adapted and projected from two into three dimensions as narrative experiences for theme parks, cruise ships, resorts and theatrical productions. In this case, the spectator now walks or rides through a Disney fantasy world instead of sitting in front of a screen.[12] Examples include the reappearance of elements of Disney movies and television shows in rides ("Dumbo the Flying Elephant") and attractions (Cinderella Castle, Disney characters) at the Disney theme parks, and reciprocally of promotion of Disney theme parks and films through recontextualized segments on Disney anthology television shows from *Disneyland* in 1954 to the present. And the Disney Channel is a kind of totalizing experience, with all commercials and programs promoting Disney

products all the time with a relentlessly perky rhythm and cast of characters.

These four films join *Saving Mr. Banks* in raiding different parts of the Disney vaults, finding exchange and brand-building value in extrinsic or obscure Disney-related materials, constructing and appealing to emergent and established Disney fan groups, and extending the Disney gravitational field, drawing peripheral artifacts and audiences into the Disney universe. Janet Wasko constructs a useful typology of Disney audience archetypes, from fanatics, fans and consumers through cynics, the uninterested, resisters and antagonists.[13] All five of these films target intense Disney fanatics, fans and consumers, who buy large quantities of Disney products, often cherish their insider knowledge of Disney trivia, and though they sometimes question Disney's activities, almost always accept the general frames and explanations generated by the company's extensive publicity, including the company's version of its own history. Though intense fans are relatively small in number, Disney seems to have recognized that they likely have influence far beyond their numbers. They often function as unpaid publicists and/or future employees. These films in different ways address them specifically within a more general address to less engaged or knowledgeable mass audiences.

Documentary and truthiness

Perhaps more important, all of these films use the documentary mode in one way or another to present what seems like factual knowledge behind the façade of the fictional fun factory that is Disney. By now, many adults and even teenagers know there is an extensive and sometimes sordid history behind Disney's public façade. It is one of the jobs of Disney's perception management apparatus to seem to reduce this gap between the perceived history and the façade by updating the façade with the conventions of current documentary "truthiness,"[14] inoculating the slightly hipper and more knowledgeable of its consumers against alternative or oppositional, more critical frames.

The first three of these films are relatively conventional low-budget documentaries, made independently but within the Disney orbit. *The Pixar Story*, released the year after Disney bought Pixar in 2006, with John Lasseter and Steve Jobs as contemporary creatives exhibiting dimensions of Walt's talents, traces the rise of this company which has re-energized Disney animation by challenging it both creatively and commercially. Though the film doesn't probe this deeply, John Lasseter is emerging as a possible 21st-century Walt without the self-promotion. He is now Chief Creative Officer of both Pixar and Walt Disney Animation Studios as part of a deal to preserve Pixar's identity and its potential to provide a creative counterforce protected from Disney's pervasive corporate culture of deadening hypercommercialism, which measures every creative idea against its ability to move merchandise and generate theme park revenue. Company management, including Lasseter, Ed Catmull, a Pixar co-founder, and Disney CEO Robert Iger, seems to be looking for a way for Pixar and Disney animation to compete productively with one another as well as with Dreamworks, Fox and other, newer producers. And this management strategy clearly owes a lot to Steve Jobs, who, as an advisor and confidant to Iger, helped ease out Eisner in 2005 and

became a major force on Disney's board of directors after Disney bought Pixar in 2006 until his death in 2011.[15]

Walt & El Grupo organizes home movies taken by Walt Disney and his wife Lillian, along with sixteen of the studio's artists, into a travelogue about their ten-week goodwill tour of Latin America in 1941, urged by President Roosevelt to help build ties in the hemisphere to counter Nazi influence there. However, like the other films here and Disney history generally, the film neglects and devalues the cartoonists themselves in favor of their boss, who was partly avoiding a strike back in Burbank by many of his cartoonists during the summer of 1941. They were protesting precisely that devaluation in the form of low pay, forced overtime, Walt's practice of taking credit for their work, and his authoritarian and paternalistic management.[16]

More than the other two documentaries, *Saving Sleeping Beauty*, focusing on Disney animation from 1984 to 1994, sometimes captures the viewpoint of the working artists who actually produce Disney and Pixar movies, since it consists largely of home movies by and interviews with animators. The film captures some of the manic creative energy, impossibly long hours and stressful working conditions of what was until recently a virtually all-male environment. The new digital animation industry often shares such working conditions with other emergent digital industries in what Andrew Ross calls "the industrialization of bohemia." [17] And the new Disney or Pixar worker frequently shares many traits with his/her counterparts in other digital workplaces. They have a youthful ability and willingness to devote long hours to loosely-supervised creative projects organized for deadlines rather than regular production. And they prefer contingent, casual and casualized work consistent with their countercultural, artistic and anti-authoritarian attitudes. [18]

However, *Saving Sleeping Beauty* encloses the animators' viewpoint within the larger priorities of Disney management, and it is directed by Don Hahn, a Disney producer. It most often turns its fascinated gaze on the over-publicized battles between the grotesquely overpaid Disney executives Michael Eisner and Jeffrey Katzenberg, intermittently mediated by Roy E. Disney and Disney President Frank Wells. The film focuses on the 1984-94 period when Eisner and Katzenberg take most of the credit for the "renaissance" of Disney feature animation with *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin* and *The Lion King*. The film ignores the later years of Eisner's reign when, having elbowed Katzenberg out of the race to become the new Walt Disney, his outsized compensation packages, subservient board of directors, and incessant self-promotion attracted attention even from a usually uncritical business press as well as from theme park visitors grumbling about rapidly rising prices.

You will not learn from this film that this was the era when U.S. workers' productivity began to be disconnected from their wages, when longer, more intense work hours and technological innovations resulted not in rising wages for Disney and other U.S. employees, but in ever more spectacular salaries, bonuses and golden parachutes for top owner-managers.[19] Now treated as stars, Michael Eisner and his cohort in the world's most successful

entertainment conglomerate became poster boys for this trend: In 1993 Eisner was the highest-paid executive in the country, with more than \$203 million in salary and stock options. Katzenberg would later receive a golden parachute of around \$100 million and Michael Ovitz over \$200 million, while U.S. minimum-wage earners in 1997, including many Disney “cast members” and other theme park employees, were making \$4.75 an hour.[20] If we understand that the neoliberal policies (deregulation, union-busting, authoritarian populism) of Walt’s old ally in anticommunism Ronald Reagan are gathering momentum during this period, it casts a different light on the documentary authority of the film, the animators’ photos and home movies of their meetings with the bosses, handheld images and recorded memories of the bosses’ public and private feuds, and the endearing cartoonists’ caricatures of Eisner and Katzenberg.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Get a Horse!, a delightful six-minute cartoon that played theatrically with Disney's 3-D hit *Frozen* in 2013 and also appears on the DVD of that film, pays homage to Walt Disney's earliest Mickey Mouse shorts like *Steamboat Willie* and *Plane Crazy* (both 1928). Thus it symbolically links the first well-known Disney animated successes with the company's contemporary hit. And its style limns a narrative of animation's Technological Progress, a version of history much beloved at Disney and elsewhere: Mickey and his pals go out for a hayride in 2-D black and white hand-drawn images, and their subsequent chase and fight with Pegleg Pete eventually bursts through the small screen into larger-screen 3-D color computer animation.

Whereas the three documentaries discussed above are aimed at smaller but possibly influential audiences of Disney fans, *Get a Horse!* reached a much larger audience with its wide theatrical "piggyback" release, a practice Disney has used before with its animated features, which are often less than ninety minutes. Many of those in the mass audience, however, had no context for what they were seeing. Fans and aficionados, on the other hand, some of whom are aspiring animators, could develop some usually uncritical context online. This smaller audience could be socially rewarded for sharing its insider knowledge as context, a documentary supplement to its anarchic fun. They could tell their friends and acquaintances that Walt Disney himself recorded the voice of Mickey Mouse in more than a hundred cartoons beginning in 1928. And the high, squeaky voice of early Mickey is here reconstructed by painstakingly selecting, rerecording and assembling fragments of Disney's voice into Mickey's new dialogue.[21][[open endnotes in new window](#)]

Two of the urban legends about Walt Disney maintain that he had himself cryogenically frozen so he could be resurrected by a more advanced future medical science, and also that he made several short films just before his death to be viewed every five years by his employees as instructions for the direction of the company. Certainly these rumors suggest symptomatic anxiety over his death and its implications for his company's future. But as Sammond argues, they also testify to

"an intimate association between the man and his corporation, the idea that the company was nothing more or less than the physical manifestation of his innermost desires and dreams, a fantasy he made real and shared with the world." [22]

At this historical moment when the increasingly diversified conglomerate, now lacking direction from Walt's descendants, may be losing its mythical family identity, what could be more apposite than a technological resurrection, only superficially secular, which brings back the literal voice of

the man himself, realizing and sharing his founding fantasy with the world?

The documentary element in *Get a Horse!* is available and interesting only to a minority with special knowledge. *Saving Mr. Banks*, on the other hand, uses the nonfiction mode as guarantor of the truth of its fiction, its version of history, more prominently in its closing credit sequence. In those credits: “The producers wish to acknowledge the work of Valerie Lawson, author of ‘Mary Poppins, She Wrote—The Life of P.L. Travers.’” Lawson tells us that all of Travers’ script conferences with Disney’s writers were recorded.[23] *Saving Mr. Banks* presents Travers as insisting on the recordings, making them a central part of its narrative, both painful and funny; then the closing credit sequence provides a big close-up of the early-sixties model reel-to-reel tape recorder we have just seen in the film. But this time we hear not the voice of Emma Thompson playing Travers, but the voice of the real P.L. Travers lecturing Da Gradi and the Sherman Brothers in 1961.[24] It is as if The Walt Disney Company were addressing us directly through the film: This is a true story, and we’ve got the tapes to prove it! But as we will see, the film’s 1961 story (its present) is anchored less in any documentary authenticity than in an evanescent “gut feeling” of documentary truthiness as guarantor for a film in which the conventions of classical narrative form and genre (melodrama, the musical) contend with the demands of Disney corporate self-promotion.

Characteristics of Disney and its products: commodification

Let’s summarize the arguments made so far about The Walt Disney Company, and develop their implications further in order to understand some conditions of possibility for the corporation’s representation of Walt Disney and itself in *Saving Mr. Banks*.

The Walt Disney Company has built an entertainment and media empire on appeals to largely white, middle class and culturally conservative consumers with stories, characters and products about idealized nuclear families: parents, children and pets. Since the late twenties, the company has built the public figure of “Walt Disney” into a *simulacrum* of itself—model parent, empathetic family-entertainment creator, and paternal boss. That is, although the public image of “Walt Disney” is largely a product of the private corporation itself, that image also acts as the external referent, authenticator and justifier for the systematized functions of the corporation that produces it.

However, Disney’s target audience has always been more racially and sexually diverse; the family dynamics of Disney consumers are more various, contradictory and nuanced than the characters and families in Disney stories. And as the corporation has grown and its consumers multiplied, the constructed image of “Walt Disney” as simulacrum for the company and its imagined audience has aged, has become less and less credible as it moves more firmly into the past. From the thirties to today, this image has receded from model father and parental identification figure to uncle, grandfather, and now great-grandfather, of whom those now living have little or no memory. As the real children of Walt and Roy O. Disney have themselves

passed on, and their children have gone their own ways, so the imagined family of Disney consumers constructed by the corporation's products has, since the eighties, been forced to expand, even while maintaining conventional standards of white beauty and patriarchy. It's clearly time for a remodeling of Walt's image, for him to be played by Tom Hanks, a new simulacrum for managing change.

Disney's business model is built on quickly readable modular units of familiar personality traits, song and narrative fragments, and highly conventionalized visual elements of color, design and movement. Designed for reproduction and easy adaptation to a number of commercial and industrial contexts—indeed to destroy and remake those contexts—these standardized and highly commodified constructs are combined into animated and live action films or other media products, sold as merchandise, or made into built environments (theme parks, resorts, cruise ships) where the modules become three dimensional fantasy “themes” in which you can move, eat, play, live and consume.[25]

The commodity modules must all function as both appealing products on their own and also as advertisements for other Disney products: cross-promotion, reciprocal advertising and media convergence, combined with careful attention to quality of products and services, generate a magical synthesis. They have created an aura around the Disney brand much more valuable than that of competing brands like Universal or Dreamworks, and updated in recent years through its institutional and marketing association with Apple.[26] The larger self-referential Disney universe excludes elements from outside in the same way the theme parks exclude outside buildings or other sights and sounds that would break the fantasy illusion. The distinctive Disney brand must be constantly built, maintained, protected and extended. Steve Jobs helped remodel the Walt Disney Company because he understood that brand, combined with a distinctive quality of products and services, is a form of capital. He

“encouraged Disney executives to think in terms of ‘brand deposits’ or ‘brand withdrawals’ every time they made a movie, television show or consumer product.”[27]

Saving Mr. Banks is the kind of brand deposit or investment likely to continue to pay cultural dividends for many years.

Disney animated features most fully exemplify the corporate practice of generating commodity-modules, since they must generate merchandisable stories, situations and personalities as well as pop songs with lots of musical hooks. In fact, musical hooks are not only an example but also a good model for all the commodity-modules with which Disney and other producers commercialize culture. A musical hook is a musical or lyrical phrase, usually seven to ten seconds long, that is repetitive, memorable, attention-grabbing, made to sell and often easy to dance to.[28] It's the most efficiently commodified unit within the pop song, since it simultaneously separates itself from its musical context and returns listeners, almost involuntarily, to the song again and again.

If you've seen Disney's *Mary Poppins* or *Saving Mr. Banks*, think of "Chim-chim-inee, chim-chim-inee, chim-chim cheree," "Let's Go Fly a Kite," or "Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious." If you've encountered "Let It Go," the quasi-feminist "power ballad" from Disney's *Frozen* (2013), you may remember the song's soaring musical phrase that has snagged an edge of your memory's network.[29] Likewise, a narrative hook in a written or visual story is an early action, mystery, engaging setting or character that pulls the reader or spectator through the textual experience by hooking readers' attention, efficiently subordinating form and style, space and time to narrative, making the story more consumable. ("I couldn't stop reading/watching/listening.") Commercial film and media makers, game and theme park designers work to orchestrate narrative and formal elements into spatial and temporal hooks that facilitate their own decontextualization, are easily resold in other venues, and beckon us in distraction back to the cherished ride or game or movie again. For Disney and other entertainment companies, virality can be a sign of success for their modal commodity-hooks.

While the narrative, visual and musical hooks are perhaps less obvious in a film like *Saving Mr. Banks*, targeted as it seems to be primarily to adults rather than to children and teenagers, there are still plenty of them. The film is full of lively songs-in-process, seeing Disneyland with Walt himself in 1961, and the world premiere of *Mary Poppins* at Grauman's Chinese Theater in 1964. Lacking virtually any evocation of the very different, less commodifiable charms of P.L. Travers' *Mary Poppins* books, *Saving Mr. Banks* is much more likely to take you to the newly-reissued 50th Anniversary Edition of Disney's *Mary Poppins* or another Disney product than it is to any of Travers' books. And reciprocally, Disney's new *Mary Poppins* DVD bears scarcely a mention of P.L. Travers' work, though it carries a promotional special feature, "Becoming Mr. Sherman," including a "fun and musical-filled afternoon" with Dick Sherman, the surviving Sherman brother, and Jason Schwartzman, who plays him in *Saving Mr. Banks*. It also has "heartwarming, revealing stories about the making of this beloved musical," Sherman's reminiscences about working with Walt and a "sneak peek" at the new film, thus leading us back to that biggest of all making-of movies, and completing the ritualized cycle of mutual back-patting among Disney commodities.[30]

As we will see, *Saving Mr. Banks* will lead us away from Pamela Travers and toward Walt Disney in many more ways than just its invocation of Disney's *Mary Poppins* film. *Saving Mr. Banks* is virtually a narrative argument for Walt's contention to her that he understood *Mary Poppins* better than she did. [31] Within the commercial universe of standardized culture-units that his company built and that he lived in, he was right.

History of Disney: synergy and convergence

I don't wish to leave the impression that the many parts of The Walt Disney Company work together in smooth capitalist synergy like the apparently smoothly operating parts of one of its successful films or the soothingly ludic environments created for maximum consumption by the theme parks. In fact, much of the corporation's history concerns its often unsuccessful struggles to make the conglomerate's parts work together, struggles that continue to this

day and that constitute a dominant theme in the biographical, business and critical literature on Disney.

The company built early success with merchandising and cross-promotion, which helped pay for its expensive move to feature animation.[32] Walt's interest in theme parks, urban design and live action films from the late thirties on was spurred by the expense and unreliable box-office returns of feature animation as well as the 1941 cartoonists' strike against the studio.[33] An argument raged for decades, both inside and outside Disney, over whether feature animation was not only part of the company's public identity but the key source of new characters and other commodified module-hooks necessary to sell more merchandise and advertising time on television and to create new attractions for repeat business at the theme parks. Top Disney executives from Walt to the present have failed to resolve this argument, to provide a consistent flow of new material from animated or live action features (or other sources) so as to keep the biggest profit centers, merchandising, television and theme parks, humming with new product and cash for growth.[34]

Finally, after the spectacular gilded-age battles among top owner-managers Roy E. Disney, Ron Miller, Jeffrey Katzenberg, Michael Eisner and others, Robert Iger, allied with Steve Jobs, produced or expanded a tentative compromise, reducing the company's strategic risk and providing multiple sources of new branded personality-commodities. They did this by purchasing Pixar in 2006, the Marvel stable of characters and stories in 2009, and the Star Wars franchise with Lucasfilm in 2012.[35] CGI technology aided this compromise for many by blurring the boundaries between animation and live action in big studio films, and the families that were Disney's core audience assumed new forms and colors. Thus the extension of the Disney brand to include Pixar, Marvel, Star Wars and other intellectual property prompted more questions about whether Disney in the new century meant anything except an increasingly vague commitment to an increasingly fractured family market, a brand devoted above all to managing diversity, surveilling and controlling its customers, and extracting maximum loyalty and cash from children of all ages.[36]

In this context, then, *Saving Mr. Banks* resembles other Disney products. As Alan Bryman has argued,

“nothing ever seems to be done by Disney for a single reason because of its commitment to [marketing and merchandising] synergy.”[37]

Thus there's a common impression that the panoply of family fun and magic, so perfectly planned and controlled, also has other less obvious functions in that planning and control.[38] Just as people may become aware, pleasurably or not, of some of the myriad ways in which they are being controlled in the theme parks, resorts or cruise ships, *Saving Mr. Banks* and other Disney films, more than other Hollywood products, often create the impression that there is something else going on here besides an entertaining experience, that corporate agendas are being fulfilled, that a sales pitch and an argument is also being made. By now Disney's nearly century-long brand-building may be precision-tuned and pervasive, but its functionality, its systemic efficiency,

also emerges more frequently into visibility, producing a cynicism which may accompany consumerist pleasures. Several reviews of *Saving Mr. Banks* reference this quality:

- the film is “efficient to a fault,”[39]
- cause and effect “are clipped together as neatly as a hook and eye,”[40]
- the film’s conclusion is “a touch spelled-out”[41] and
- its drama is “uncomfortably reductive.”[42]

It’s hard for a movie to be just a movie when it also has to be a commercial for other Disney products.

Private control, public resistance

All of this suggests that The Walt Disney Company—as its private power has grown, as it has reached into more and more aspects of everyday life around the world—has increasingly come into conflict with changing public priorities and values. These conflicts range from particular communities and local governments opposing new Disney developments in their locations to long-running public criticism, largely unanswered, of pervasive racism, sexism, and naturalization and idealization of rigid social hierarchies in many Disney films.[43] And the corporation’s imperative to control its public image increasingly conflicts with competing public interests, since it necessarily involves trying to control publics, turning them into atomized consumers.

Since the late thirties the company has become known for Disneyfication, its systematic transformation of every story or other property it acquires, no matter how original or unconventional, into something superficial, formulaic and sanitized. But in more recent decades the theme parks have become the most socially and institutionally influential part of the growing Disney empire. This influence is perhaps best described as *Disneyization* (in parallel with *McDonaldization*, after the fast food chain), the spatial and social extension of Disneyfication. Disneyization includes

- theming;
- hybrid or connected consumption at malls, parks, restaurants, hotels, casinos and concert and sports arenas;
- merchandising; and
- performative or emotional labor by employees.

These practices have been adopted by private and public institutions far from the Disney entertainment universe, including those with significant public missions such as airports, museums, zoos, and urban planning generally. Disneyization is a key dimension of the increasing privatization of these and other public institutions.[44]

Many multinational corporations aspire to control their public image and their publics as effectively as does Disney. But Disney’s distinctive brand has increasingly been unable to avoid well-publicized contradictions within its often rapacious corporate behavior. And the press and public sometimes enjoys a good story about the Mouse House’s bad behavior almost as much as it does Disney’s own products. That a corporate conglomerate would try to

present itself as not only clean and efficient, but also just as innocent, naïve and childlike as its paradigmatic founder and consumer are supposed to be, invites the 80% of Disney's customers who are not children, plus the rest of us, to engage in some demystification even if we enjoy Disney experiences. So by now there are myriad historical reports detailing the growing contradictions between Disney's relentlessly cultivated family-values image and its sociopathic determination to maximize shareholder value, a determination and zeal seldom matched among U.S. corporations and often reported with the barely-concealed glee of someone bursting a child's balloon. [45]

There is an extensive popular and academic literature on this subject, and a full exploration of the topic is beyond the scope of this essay, so here I'll just summarize a sample of this private corporation's numerous clashes with changing public values and institutions. These problems generate a fuller, less flattering and more contradictory context than Disney can control, and while most of them are not directly about *Saving Mr. Banks*, they do cast the film and other Disney products in a very different light than the familiar Disneyfied one.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Private and public: constructions of social hierarchies

Gender. Always a politically and culturally conservative corporation, Disney has reproduced many popular gender stereotypes from its earliest days, with special emphasis on the conventionally attractive white princess who needs rescuing, and later just needs a conventionally attractive man.[46][[open endnotes in new window](#)] From the antic chases of the first Silly Symphonies to the long line of princesses from *Snow White* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950) and *Pretty Woman* (1990) through Ariel in *The Little Mermaid* (1989), Belle in *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), and beyond, Disney has taught that girls must be paired off with men to be happy. And it continues to teach this lesson through the recirculation of these films and images.

But increasing with second wave feminism in the sixties and seventies, Disney has encountered a growing chorus of criticism for its representations of gender.[47] The company pretended to ignore this criticism as it grew, yet has tacitly engaged with its critics as its heroines have become superficially more ethnically diverse (*Pocahontas* [1995], *Mulan* [1998], and *The Princess and the Frog* [2009]) and central to the films' narratives (*Frozen* [2013]). However, the corporation has been slow to promote women to positions of responsibility, and as yet no woman has solo directed a Disney animated feature. Throughout, Disney has failed to respond to changing social constructions of gender until resistance became more visible and public, and the corporation continues to market its older, more blatantly patriarchal films in multiple venues to new generations.

Sexualities. As more complex understandings of sexualities have supplemented conventional notions of gender, some have come to understand that Disney, seemingly a bastion of compulsory heterosexuality, has not only made covert and a few overt appeals to gay audiences, but it has long employed lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer and transgendered people, while keeping LGBTQ characters largely invisible in its products. Sean Griffin has complicated these emergent queer understandings with his explorations of the history of gay culture's use of various Disney motifs, the role of lesbians and gays within the company, and the ongoing struggles over "Gay Days" at the Disney theme parks.[49]

These struggles can be seen as uneven and often unsuccessful yet continuing attempts to treat a private company as a public resource and the private property of the theme parks as public spaces, to be defined by their heterogeneous workers and citizen-consumers as much as by Disney. While the gay rights movement generally operates within a liberal political

framework of appeals for full inclusion within public life, some aspects of it strive for a more expansive and radical definition of citizenship to include a rejection of the consumer capitalism that constantly privatizes and constricts that public life. Capitalism commodifies gay as well as straight identities by turning the public signs of identity into private property. As Griffin concludes,

“As Disney and its advertising seem to encourage homosexual viewers to ‘do’ gay readings of their product, such advertising also regulates how that reading is supposed to be done and who is authorized to do it, turning a subversive strategy into a potential for more profit....[although] such target marketing is not completely effective.”[50]

Unfortunately, while Disney has begun to take cautious steps to make its marketing address more of the world’s sexual (and gender and racial) diversity, it ignored a major opportunity in *Saving Mr. Banks*. The real P.L. Travers was bisexual and complicated. She moved in literary and bohemian circles where she could be relatively open about her romances and associations. But *Saving Mr. Banks* is tasked with making Walt look as saintly as possible, though it tries to inoculate itself against criticism by acknowledging but de-emphasizing his drinking, smoking, and patriarchal attitudes. So the company apparently thinks it must, by contrast, turn Pamela Travers into a too-often mean and psychologically one-dimensional spinster with major daddy issues. Thus there is no hint of Travers’ bisexuality or many of her other interesting traits.

Race. Since its beginnings, Disney’s racist and ethnocentric constructions have also been pervasive, including widely-discussed racial caricatures in such films as *The Three Little Pigs* (1933), *Fantasia* (1940), *Dumbo* (1941), *Peter Pan* (1953), *The Jungle Book* (1967), *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Chip n’ Dale Rescue Rangers* (1989 TV series), and *Aladdin* (1992).[51] Of course many other media corporations have sold racist products. The difference here is that, with the sole (and likely temporary) exception of *Peter Pan*, Disney continues to re-circulate these films worldwide in 2014. Re-selling everything from its vaults seems to be a compulsion the company can’t break. Even its most notoriously racist film, *Song of the South* (1946), picketed and protested since its opening, still turns up wholly and in commodified pieces throughout the Disney universe and elsewhere. Jason Sperb has insightfully analyzed the ugly reception history of this film, including the confusions of its twenty-first century fans. He notes that Disney’s famously aggressive legal department continues to ignore the easy availability online of pirate copies of the film and related Disneyana. Perhaps more important, the film is legally available in many other countries outside the United States.[52]

Neo-Colonialism. Newer approaches contextualize Disney representations of gender, sexuality and race within larger neo-colonialist narratives. In their analysis of Disney’s *Pocahontas* (1995) and *Pocahontas II: Journey to a New World* (1998), Radha Jhappan and Daiva Stasiulis acknowledge the improvements Disney has made over previous representations of women and “Indians” while demonstrating how the films continue to demonstrate white (English and American) superiority and justify colonialism:

“The impression left at the end of each film, that British imperialism was called off, is indeed one of the most fanciful yet serious departures from reality committed by Disney’s narratives....the interracial love story between Smith and Pocahontas serves to legitimize that colonization.”[53]

Private and public: Disney’s exploitation of labor

The Walt Disney Company has a long corporate history of aggressive property development, obsessive control of copyrights and trademarks, and bad corporate citizenship within the societies and communities from which it extracts resources, employees and capital.[54] Although I am not claiming any direct causal connections with *Saving Mr. Banks*, nevertheless to understand more fully the contradictions in the company’s actions is to understand more fully the import of *Saving Mr. Banks* as corporate self-promotion and mission statement. Here I will focus on updating previous accounts of Disney’s exploitation of its workers, which began with cartoonists in the twenties and thirties and now extends to the workers of the world.

Like many multinational corporations, Disney makes huge profits on merchandise sold at high prices in developed countries and made in low wage, often sweatshop conditions throughout the developing world. Because Disney and other corporations refuse to protect those who make their products with the same zeal with which they protect their own brands and trademarks, those workers often labor in unsafe, oppressive and inhumane sweatshop conditions. Although these workers are employed by suppliers and subcontractors, Disney, Wal-Mart, Apple and other companies repeatedly create, with the low prices they demand, the conditions for sweatshops.[55]

Over and over again, such sweatshop injustices are compounded by tragedies in which workers lose their lives. On the evening of November 24, 2012, at least 112 garment workers were killed at the Tazreen Fashion garment factory in Bangladesh. Disney and Wal-Mart garments were being sewn there. Three weeks later, the Institute for Global Labour and Human Rights reported on similar conditions in another factory making Disney and Wal-Mart products, the Dream International Toy Factory in Shenzhen, China.[56]

Meanwhile, around the world in Orlando, Florida, Walt Disney World is the largest employer in the region, so large (around 60,000 workers, over 12 percent of the total regional workforce) that its low wages depress the already low wages in the whole Central Florida area with its predominantly tourist-driven economy.[57] In 1998, through all-too-common collective bargaining laws and processes designed to weaken workers and their unions, and to make organizing practically illegal, Disney effectively imposed a two-tier wage system on its non-tipped service workers. Those hired after Dec. 12, 1998 received smaller pay increases starting in 2001, so they have been permanently paid at a lower rate than their counterparts hired previously.[58]

“In 1998 its entry level hourly wage scale was 5-8% higher than its competitors [Universal Studios and Sea World]; by 2006 it was 3-4% lower.”[59]

The tens of millions of dollars Disney saves in this way is mostly extracted from the economy of greater Orlando and goes to stockholders, top-level executives, and investments elsewhere.[60]

In 2010 UniteHere Local 362, one of six unions negotiating a new contract for over 27,000 bus drivers, waiters, custodians, parking attendants and front desk staff, produced a documentary film titled *Mouse Trapped 2010*. With average wages for union workers around \$10 an hour, Doug, a worker in Animal Kingdom, said on camera,

“For me and my family to survive, we have to go to the churches. We have to go to the church and we get handouts.”

And Bryan in the Transportation and Ticketing Center said in the film,

“I can work for 50 hours a week and bring home \$165 because of my insurance and other deductions that come out of my paycheck.”[61]

By 2014, many of Disney World’s employees were still only making the minimum wage of \$8.03 an hour in Florida, a right-to-work-for-less state. [62] In 2013, Walt Disney World, along with Darden Restaurants, a low-wage chain, and other business groups, successfully lobbied the Florida Legislature and Governor for a new state law prohibiting local governments from enacting measures to guarantee paid sick days for all food service workers, thus ensuring that many of those workers, mostly women, would be forced to come to work sick and spread their illnesses to others.[63]

Private and public: Abigail Disney refuses to build the family brand

The corporate media, composing the first draft of public history, continue to ignore or de-emphasize any more critical or complete account of the activities of Disney or other large corporations. So it’s not surprising that they largely ignored Meryl Streep’s unusual introduction of Emma Thompson at the annual National Board of Review awards gala in New York on January 7, 2014, which was more fully reported in the trade press and British newspapers. Streep, who had reportedly been offered the part of P.L. Travers for which Thompson was being honored, pointed out that Walt Disney

“had some...racist proclivities. He formed and supported an anti-Semitic industry lobby. And he was certainly, on the evidence of his company’s policies, a gender bigot.”[64]

She went on to quote a 1938 letter from Disney to a young woman named Mary Ford of Arkansas, who had applied to his company’s training program for cartoonists. Disney replied,

“Women do not do any of the creative work in connection with preparing the cartoons for the screen, as that task is performed entirely by young men. For this reason, girls are not considered for

the training school.”[65]

It is not news that Walt Disney was a man of his times, or that there was a sexist division of labor in animation as in many other areas of life during this period as in our own. Streep’s historical claims are well supported by the historical literature, including even Neal Gabler’s authorized hagiography of Walt Disney.[66] But the trade press and blogosphere mostly treated her remarks as controversial. The reaction from Disney fans in online comments was predictably defensive and hysterical, attacking Streep as a bad actor and a “bitch.”[67] As elsewhere, conservative defenses of bigotry in the past slid quickly from “everyone was doing it” to nostalgic attempts to recreate a time when critiques of bigotry could easily be ignored or silenced.

What happened next was less predictable. It came from Abigail Disney, Roy E. Disney’s daughter and Walt’s grandniece, a documentary filmmaker, social activist and philanthropist with a Ph.D. from Columbia and politics very different from her famous family members. On her Facebook page on Jan. 10, 2014, Disney acknowledged “mixed feelings” about Walt:

“Anti-Semite? Check. Misogynist? OF COURSE!! Racist? C'mon, he made a film (Jungle Book) about how you should stay 'with your own kind' at the height of the fight over segregation! As if the 'King of the Jungle' number wasn't proof enough!! How much more information do you need? But damn, he was hella good at making films and his work has made billions of people happy. There's no denying it. So there ya go. Mixed feelings up the wazoo.”[68]

She went on to criticize *Saving Mr. Banks* as “a misplaced attempt at hagiography”:

“I LOVED what Meryl Streep said. I know he was a man of his times and I can forgive him, but *Saving Mr Banks* was a brazen attempt by the company to make a saint out of the man.”[69]

Only in the worlds of Hollywood publicity and Disney fetishism could these comments seem startling. More interestingly, at the moment that the corporation attempts to assimilate other brands (Pixar, Marvel, Star Wars) around its core brand, thus stretching the Disney brand to the breaking point, it seeks to ground its synthetic identity ever more thoroughly in its own constructions while the real Disney family ceases to act as guarantor of brand identity. Ms. Disney’s comments record a moment in the separation of the Disney family from the corporation that bears its name, and a shifting in the connotations of the Disney brand as the connections between family and corporation become almost entirely symbolic. In its attempts to mythologize itself by systematically confusing a corporation with a person, the company can no longer count on much help from the younger generation of Disneys. One can easily understand why Abigail Disney might prefer to separate her identity from the company’s, and might even wish that the company stop pretending it has a human identity.

I referred above to the relatively small but influential audience of Disney fans,

many of whom read and comment on online stories about Disney and comprise the most attentive audience for *The Pixar Story*, *Walt & El Grupo*, *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, *Get a Horse!* and to a lesser extent *Saving Mr. Banks*. Based on their comments on press reports of Meryl Streep's mild and factual remarks about Walt Disney, these Disney fans have a lot in common with the fans of Disney's *Song of the South* discussed by Jason Sperb. Many in both groups seem unable to accept that a film they love, especially one they cherish from childhood, might turn out, like its creators, to be on further adult reflection sexist, racist or otherwise bigoted. Beyond those who might wish to deny the existence of any bigotry in Disney or anywhere else, there is here an attempt to deny any imperfection in the object of their affection, a denial that many people will reasonably find some of Disney's films less than timeless and universal, and Walt and his crew historical rather than magical.

As if to demonstrate in miniature why the Disney brand needs constant maintenance through products like *Saving Mr. Banks*, Meryl Streep and Abigail Disney, representing the East Coast feminist wing of non- or anti-Disney culture, generate and expose small, peripheral fissures in the smooth, magical surface of the Disney public image. In her introduction of Emma Thompson, Streep called Thompson "a rabid, man-eating feminist, like I am." [70] And as I will show below, although Meryl Streep and Abigail Disney are talking explicitly about Walt Disney, they are also talking implicitly about how Walt's company, continuing the policies he began, has, with *Saving Mr. Banks*, done its best to finally put Pamela Travers firmly in her (Disney) place.

The compatibility of the Disney and Tom Hanks brands

Although Abigail Disney is not willing to build the Disney brand, Tom Hanks certainly is. In many ways he is uniquely positioned, as a commodity-brand, to help remodel the simulacrum that is "Walt Disney" for the twenty-first century. In February 2014, according to *Forbes* magazine, Tom Hanks was the "Most Trustworthy Celebrity" among Americans, just ahead of Carol Burnett and Morgan Freeman, and he also topped the *Reader's Digest* "Trust Poll" in 2013. [71] In December 2013 The Harris Poll named Tom Hanks as "America's Favorite Movie Star," and he was the favorite among both the most-educated (post grad) as well as the least (high school or less). [72] In 2014, when NPR's "All Things Considered" asked U.S. men what movies made them cry, an unexpected pattern developed: in more than 5000 replies,

"Hanks was mentioned far more than any other actor, and for a wider range of performances." [73]

Popularly known for playing ordinary, everyman guys, Hanks has come to embody for many the nice boy next door, charming, familiar, good natured, and emotionally open, a contemporary Jimmy Stewart. Beginning with comedy roles on television series like *Bosom Buddies* (1980-1982), he went on to movie stardom in *Splash* (1982, Disney) and *Big* (1988), then to three of his biggest successes, *Philadelphia* (1993), *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), and *Forrest Gump* (1994). By then his star brand was well-established: boyish and soft-bodied, sexually muted or passive, Hanks became the boomer alternative

to the rampaging tough guys played by Sylvester Stallone, Bruce Willis and Mel Gibson.[74] He starred in *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and *The Green Mile* (1999) and began a star franchise with *The Da Vinci Code* (2006). The core of boyish asexuality remained key to most of his later star performances, and certainly to his updating and reconstruction of the image of Walt Disney. Hanks was 57 when he played Disney, and the role merges the brands of Walt Disney and Tom Hanks into the apotheosis of the ordinary man Hanks has played so often, now older and legitimized in a “hierarchical order of adult male power and authority,”[75] yet whose talent lies in his intimate connection with the innocent and playful boy-child as Disney consumer within.

The real Walt Disney apparently remained unable or unwilling to fully articulate anything like a mission statement,[76] but his company has grown so large, so distant from its playful and anarchic origins that it requires a new, twenty-first century Walt. Those very mid-twentieth century Audioanimatronic figures at the Hall of Presidents speaking those mechanical civics-lesson clichés perhaps inadvertently expressed the viewpoint of the conservative Walt Disney and his corporation on democracy, the state, and the public realm. In Tom Hanks the Walt Disney Company found its ideal new Walt. In Hanks the corporation found an actor to embody itself, an actor as technically accomplished and alive as those embodiments of the public state were inept and dead. More important, though, as Fred Pfeil has pointed out, a generally unnoticed dimension of Hanks’ star persona is that he generally plays characters who are exclusively concerned with private and psychological life, who are publicly and politically indifferent:

“There are no larger purposes or higher values in the world in which Hanks’ masculinity is normative than that of accomplishing whatever mission you happen to be given—and/or, insofar as you are still a bagman, doing as you please.”[77]

Given the corporate values of most Hollywood films, this may be a trait that Hanks’ persona shares with that of most other contemporary U.S. stars. However, it certainly assures his compatibility with Disney, a corporation like others devoted to the neoliberal values of commodification and privatization, and an indifference or hostility toward public institutions and civic life. [78]Perhaps in time future generations will, at the mention of Walt Disney’s name, conjure up an image of Tom Hanks rather than that genial old guy on the old television images. If so, that would be entirely appropriate, since Hanks would seem to be the ideal personalizing star for a personalizing era.

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Private and public: personalizing the corporation and corporate personhood

At this point let's reflect briefly on some possible implications of this organized confusion of a corporation with a person, since the question of whether corporations are people has become a major political and legal issue in the United States. Conservatives have been claiming for more than a century that corporations are people. And in this light, many observers, apparently including the Supreme Court's liberal minority, believe that in a strongly contested 5-4 decision, *Citizens United v. Federal Elections Commission* (2010), the Court has now powerfully expanded the rights of corporations, "treating corporate speech the same as that of human beings." [79] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) While the federal courts have long granted corporations special rights of limited liability, the accumulation of capital and eternal life (!), they have also carefully limited the other rights of corporations, especially in the political arena. Now the Supreme Court seems to be reversing this long tradition as it subscribes to the conservative legal doctrine of corporate personhood and perhaps the concept of the corporate persona with individual rights. *The New York Times* editorialized on this issue in September 2009:

"In an exchange this month with Chief Justice Roberts, the solicitor general, Elena Kagan, argued against expanding that narrowly defined personhood. 'Few of us are only our economic interests,' she said. 'We have beliefs. We have convictions.' Corporations 'engage the political process in an entirely different way, and this is what makes them so much more damaging,' she said. Chief Justice Roberts disagreed: 'A large corporation, just like an individual, has many diverse interests.' Justice Antonin Scalia said most corporations are 'indistinguishable from the individual who owns them.'" [81]

The legal doctrine is accompanied by a popular ideology, summarized most famously by Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney in Iowa in 2011:

"Corporations are people, my friend.... Everything corporations earn ultimately goes to people." [82]

The concentrated wealth of large corporations backs both the popular ideology and the conservative legal doctrine. Scalia's comment in particular sounds uncannily like the result of the decades-long work of many people inside the Walt Disney Company and elsewhere, work devoted to maintaining the founder's image and merging it with that of the institution itself.

As developed by film, television and media industries, the process of personalization actually has two parallel, partially intersecting dimensions, one specific to the Walt Disney Company, the other an industry-wide practice, the classical narrative way of telling cinematic stories developed by the Hollywood film industry and elsewhere between about 1907 and 1917 and now standardized, with variations, in commercial film and media industries around the world.[83] In the visual essay above I describe and analyze how classical narrative is used concretely in *Saving Mr. Banks* as well as the ways the film is used to idealize Walt Disney and build the Disney brand. Here I briefly summarize some general characteristics of classical film narrative, linking them to the conservative character of the personalization involved in both the legal doctrine that corporations are people and the Walt Disney Company's distinctive business strategy of building its brand around the simulated identity of its founder.

Public into private: classical narration as personalization

During the first and second decades of the twentieth century the rapidly growing film industries in Hollywood and elsewhere faced a problem: while audiences loved the movies, films were so far only a novelty. If suppliers were going to stimulate and sustain demand enough to build a viable industry, they needed to make movie going a regular habit, something that large numbers of people did every week. By the nineteen-twenties film industries had accomplished this goal, and a major reason is their development of a way of telling stories that went beyond the short distractions and spectacles of early cinema, that now absorbed huge and diverse audiences in the imaginary lives and emotions of fictional characters. As fiction film collapsed the emotional distance between spectators and screen, audiences learned the pleasures of absorption in the immediate experience of feature-length narratives in which goal-oriented characters pursued mostly personal and individual rather than public, social, collective or institutional goals.[84]

In *Saving Mr. Banks*, the protagonist, P.L. Travers, begins with conflicted goals, wanting both to sell the rights to her beloved Mary Poppins to Walt Disney and thus make enough money to keep her London house, and also the opposite, to protect her life's creation from Disneyfication. The extensive narrative flashbacks of Travers' childhood memories gradually heighten the conflict between these goals, and around the halfway point of the film Disney's version of Travers no longer is driving the narrative forward. At this point the Disney version of Walt Disney begins to assume narrative control ("We've gotta fix this, boys!") with the goal of completing his film *Mary Poppins*, which also provides therapy for Travers. The historical encounter of P.L. Travers and Walt Disney was multidimensional and complex, with important cultural, institutional and economic dimensions. But the film presents Travers' goals and conflicts as almost entirely personal and psychological, and the script flatters Disney by emphasizing his equally personal goal of making the film in order to fulfill a promise he made to his daughters rather than the necessity to continue making profitable movies. Thus the conflict between them is mostly stripped of larger social and historical

resonances, radically simplified for pleasurable consumption.

The narrative and character construction is also linear, functional, and economical. In general, only those character traits are introduced which will be useful in involving the audience in the narrative and the individual character's fate. And only those narrative events will be introduced which will function to move the narrative forward and complete the personal "arc" of the film. When the adult Travers, arriving at her hotel room in Los Angeles, immediately picks out a pear from the welcome basket and throws it out the window into the swimming pool, that action introduces a small narrative question, hook or symptom—why did she do that?—the later answer to which, in the flashbacks of her childhood, forms part of a pattern designed to promote identification with the narrative. Identification with characters and stars with personalized goals is enabled by such identification with the narrative process.

Central to classical narrative is the continuity system, which generates smooth, unbroken continuity across cuts, stabilizing the film's space and time by mapping it onto a personalized narrative.[85] The 180-degree system, analytic editing, shot-reverse shot, eyeline match, and match on action—these continuity techniques described in the visual essay above work to focus viewers' attention and emotional identification on individual characters, turning the two-dimensional screen into a window on an imaginary three-dimensional diegetic world of the story. A pleurably omnipresent camera observer cues and manages narrative information, giving and withholding knowledge, drawing viewers into emotional identification with usually plausible characters and building an industry on the industrial production and consumption of such identification.

While Hollywood and other commercial film industries were built on this conventional storytelling system for live-action features by around 1917, animated cartoons remained short novelties shown before these features, with flat, two-dimensional drawings and equally flat, stylized characters, funny but uninvolving. Although artists and intellectuals as well as larger audiences loved the early Disney shorts and the early, nasty Mickey Mouse, Walt drove his animators throughout the thirties to make cartoons that while still stylized, incorporated more lifelike, naturalistic movement and especially facial expressions.

Disney shorts began to include sweeter, more goal-oriented characters and sentimental stories audiences could care about. They quickly assimilated aspects of the continuity system as well as technological innovations like color and sound for realism and viewer involvement. The Disney studio successfully led the U.S. animation industry into features with *Snow White* in 1937 even before his animators had fully mastered the illusion of movement and gesture for maximum audience absorption and greater profits. In the thirties the company learned "personality animation," focusing spectators' attention on appealing collections of character traits, especially in animals and imaginary creatures like the fully differentiated seven dwarfs. Disney animation became less strange and magical, lost most of the uncanny dimension of moving drawings and paintings as it became more personalized and consumable.[86]

In a sense Disney domesticated animation into a niche product within the personalizing conventions of classical narrative. The company then expanded this niche in two ways in the forties and fifties. First, out of necessity during WWII and later more commercially, it made documentaries and live action features, sometimes incorporating animation into both, as in *Mary Poppins*. Second, it projected the personalized narratives into three-dimensional built environments in fantasy theme parks and urban design. Only by understanding how the Walt Disney Company hybridized animation, classical narrative, fantasy architecture and urban design through personalization can we understand the bases of the company's successful postwar diversification. [87]

Public into private: The Walt Disney Company personalizes itself

While Disney animators were developing a more naturalized and conventional style of telling personalized feature-length stories, everyone in the growing Disney organization was working to personalize the corporation itself, not just its products, for consumers. In the twenties and thirties the company learned how to identify Walt with newly popular "scientific" conceptions of parenting in a variety of media, as Sammond demonstrates.[88] In the fifties and sixties it constructed "Uncle Walt" as the host of Disneyland and other anthology television programs as well as Disneyland the new theme park. And while it constantly found brand-building exchange value in its vaults and archives, it increasingly leveraged access to those same archives in negotiations with independent journalists and historians. The company was constantly trying to impose the Disney version of its own history and especially the magical, central role of Walt in order to subordinate public priorities and information to the imperatives of this private corporation.[89] Through *Saving Mr. Banks*, for example, many more people now know the Disney version of the making of *Mary Poppins* than know more historical versions, thus reinforcing the branded myth of the oneness of Walt and his company.

In the age of corporate personhood, perhaps the corporation that seems most at one with a simulacrum of its founder now leads the struggle to legitimize indirectly, through popular ideology, the legal concept of corporate personhood. Could it be that the Disney brand is, in part, a kind of persona, personality or imaginary character that more and more people find to persuasively resemble a human being endowed with inalienable rights? In 2013, Disney was #14 on the Interbrand list of top global brands. Could it be that the qualities of trust, dependability, and innovation that many attribute to top corporate brands are less and less distinguishable from the human qualities we have historically recognized only in individuals?

Corporations as psychopathic individuals

If corporations are persons, then what are the distinctive traits of this type of person? Joel Bakan argues that in endowing the modern corporation with limited liability, legal rights and vastly more power than the individuals who comprise it, a kind of Frankenstein monster has been created, one which now

threatens the society from which it emerged. Granting the private corporation personhood makes it an independent being, a “natural entity.” Yet this, the most powerful institution on earth, now given human status, is legally required to maximize shareholder value by relentlessly pursuing its own economic self-interest, ignoring social responsibility, and externalizing its costs wherever possible. While it enormously expands the social forces of production, leading to better lives for many, it is designed to act without regard for the consequences for humans or the environment. Thus it exhibits many of the characteristics of the psychopathic individual: it is amoral and antisocial, manipulative, intensely self-interested, and lacking in empathy or remorse.[90]

Certainly many of the characteristics that I and others have identified in the Walt Disney Company, as with other large corporations, fit this unflattering profile. Its amoral self-interest includes paying its top executives hundreds of millions of dollars a year while many of its employees receive poverty wages and work in oppressive conditions. Its continued exploitation of sexist, racist and homophobic representations long after extensive public criticism and protest demonstrates a lack of empathy and remorse. And its constitutive manipulations include masking these and other antisocial behaviors behind the kindly simulacrum of its founder. What distinguishes the Walt Disney Company from other large corporations, however, is that to an unusual degree its institutional practices often help to generate the very human misery from which its products and services, its stories and characters and songs, promise like no others to provide pleasant and therapeutic escape. This circle closes with particular force in the corporate self-promotion that is *Saving Mr. Banks*.

Saving Mr. Banks: Disney history

With regard to the events depicted in *Saving Mr. Banks*, what arguments do the best historical sources allow us to make, and how do those arguments compare with the Disney interpretation in the film? Several relevant sources use primary documents, including a comprehensive biography of Travers by Valerie Lawson and an insightful long essay by Caitlin Flanagan as well as several biographies of Walt Disney.[91] Of these historical interpretations, only Lawson’s biography goes into detail about the ten days that Travers spent in Los Angeles in March 1961, consulting on the script for Disney’s *Mary Poppins*, and other events and circumstances interpreted in the film, and the film acknowledges her book. In addition, Lawson and Flanagan are independent of both sides in the long-running sparring between Disney and Travers, while Neal Gabler, the authorized Disney biographer, is the most dependent on Disney given his privileged access to the Disney archives and family. He is explicitly critical of Travers, calling her “more than a little dotty.”[92] The only surviving participant in those 1961 script conferences, the songwriter Richard Sherman, consulted with screenwriter Kelly Marcel on her revisions to the script of *Saving Mr. Banks*, and she credits him with greatly improving the voices of Disney and his writers in the film.[93] And Marcel herself has talked extensively about the script and the film. She says that she listened to many of the recorded conversations the film depicts and

read correspondence between Disney and Travers, incorporating the correspondence into the script as face-to-face conversations.[94] However, Marcel, like Neal Gabler, is not independent of the Disney organization since she and Gabler are apparently the only two granted access to relevant documents in the Disney archives. In a long interview Marcel overpraises Disney, her employer on this project.[95]

This is contested terrain, since it concerns protracted conflicts and negotiations not only between Travers on the one hand and Disney and his writers on the other, but also and much more important, and elided in Disney's version, between a hypercommercial multinational entertainment corporation with platoons of aggressive lawyers and an individual writer, part of a small Irish and English literary elite, and her own New York lawyers. However, these sources can usually be reconciled on what happened, while differing in their emphases and interpretations.

Saving Mr. Banks also treats the process of adapting a literary work into a Hollywood film. This also is contested terrain with a long history, continuing today, of Hollywood films usually represented as simplifying, dumbing down and commodifying literature to fit its image of popular tastes, although literary and artistic sources have sometimes been transformed into new and even original films. While changes by filmmakers to literary sources are not intrinsically betrayals, given reasonable artistic license, neither are the tendentious patterns of those changes a matter of historical indifference. Here I will analyze several major changes the film makes to what we know about the historical events it depicts, not in order to judge Disney for making any changes at all, but to understand the implications of those patterned changes.

Disney on Pamela Travers: personalization

A fascinating, contradictory, sometimes difficult, independent and artistic woman, P.L. Travers left her native Australia for Dublin and London in 1924 at age 25 and became a journalist, actress, dancer, adventurer, and later a writer in residence at Smith and Radcliffe.[96] She wrote poetry and erotica and a series of successful *Mary Poppins* books from the thirties through the eighties, books loved by Princess Margaret, Caroline Kennedy, Sylvia Plath and Diane Disney among many others. Her family life has been well described by Caitlin Flanagan in *The New Yorker*:

“[Disney’s] *Mary Poppins* advocates the kind of family life that Walt Disney had spent his career both chronicling and helping to foster on a national level: father at work, mother at home, children flourishing. It is tempting to imagine that in Travers he found a like-minded person, someone who embodied the virtues of conformity and traditionalism. Nothing could be further from the truth. Travers was a woman who never married, wore trousers when she felt like it, had a transformative and emotionally charged relationship with an older married man, and entered into a long-term live-in relationship with another woman. As she approached forty, she decided that she wanted a child. After a bizarre incident in which she attempted to adopt the seventeen-year-old girl who

cleaned her house, she travelled to Ireland and adopted an infant, one of a pair of twins, and raised him as a single mother. Her reverence for the delights of family life was perhaps as intense as Disney's, but her opinion about the shape such a life might assume was far more nuanced."[97]

Equally important, Travers became part of the contemporary English and Irish literary circles that included T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats.[98] A freethinker and bohemian, her differences with Walt Disney were not just personal but gendered, economic, and cultural, part of larger issues that Emma Thompson, an accomplished screenwriter herself, tried to discuss whenever possible in publicity interviews for *Saving Mr. Banks*. Thompson tried to place Travers in historical context, as an independent woman who, since her books were no longer selling enough copies to support her, only sold the rights to Disney out of economic necessity. As Virginia Woolf said, "a woman needs money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction."[99] Thompson:

"It's not just a financial question. It comes from the age-old difficulty of women being written about by Austen onward. What do you do? How do you make a living, if you're not going to be married to someone who's going to pay your bills?"[100]

But as with her own performance, Thompson was often fighting the film and its phalanx of publicity, which largely personalize the gendered differences in economic resources and culture. The film tilts Travers from a complicated representative of a formidably noncommercial value system into a lonely, deeply unhappy spinster with personal problems. From a nonconforming woman she becomes someone who would be happier if she conformed but can't until Walt provides therapy. She becomes a writer of children's books who can't stand children. Her objections to his plans for adaptation become less often the substantive critique of Disneyfication that had developed since the thirties, and more often an arbitrary (take the color red out of the film) or psychologized (save my daddy, Mr. Banks) fancy. Whereas cultural critics and experts on children's literature like Frances Clarke Sayers had by 1961 been publicly criticizing Disney for decades for his commercialization and simplification of classic children's fairy tales, on the few occasions when Travers here begins to sound like Sayers and other substantive critics of the period she usually veers off into merely mean or pathetic sidetracks.[101] The film seems to be trying, inconsistently, to both evoke and discredit critics of Disneyfication, now and in the past, as people with personal problems.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Disney on Pamela Travers: psychologization

The film not only personalizes the conflicts between Disney and Travers, it discredits Travers by simplifying her (though inconsistently), reducing most of her motivations to the psychological. The flashbacks to Helen Goff's early life in Australia become excessively and symptomatically long (some reviewers complained) since a Disney mandate for the film is to immerse viewers in the pain of her childhood, paint a simplistic picture of a woman captured by her own past. Too much in 1961 southern California reminds her of her childhood in Australia, and working through the script of *Mary Poppins* brings back memories of how she was unable to save her father. So she must repeat the past, trying to save him in the present. Since she cannot save her father, Walt must intervene to redeem him along with his film.

Travers drives the narrative during the early sections of the film as the intercutting between past and present gradually explains or over-explains her psychology. But her memories of childhood trauma gradually erode her control over the working sessions at Disney until in a confrontation with Walt and the writers, she symptomatically reveals her secret in a scoffing riposte to Walt: "You think Mary Poppins comes to save the children?!"

Since Walt has a few other things to attend to, including planning Walt Disney World, it takes him a while to become a detective and therapist, assuming control of the narrative by tracking down her childhood trauma: it's Helen's father, Mr. Banks, that Mary Poppins comes to save. In the process Walt Disney reveals an empathy Travers lacks. In a climactic monologue, the beating corporate heart of the film, Walt not only explains her motivations to her but demonstrates that though his childhood was even more Dickensian than hers, he's over it, and she should be over hers. The personal choice to be happy is revealed as his artistic credo and his company's therapeutic mission to make possible for every Disney customer. She begins to heal. She finally signs over the rights to the film, sees her father publicly saved at the premiere of Disney's *Mary Poppins*, and starts writing again.

Disney on Pamela Travers: erasure

Finally, not content to personalize and psychologize, the film virtually erases Travers' unconventional life from early childhood through the film's present. More important, it erases her significant creative work, the Mary Poppins stories, as anything more than a psychological symptom she must work through. Her nonconformist cultural, sexual and family life remains way too complex for a film trying to be a simple fable, just as her Mary Poppins stories, strange and original, full of quickly shifting tones and narrative

directions, would lose most of their distinctive qualities in Disney's hands. Disney here does to P.L. Travers something similar to what it did to her Mary Poppins books in 1964. To paraphrase another Walt (Walter Benjamin), even the dead will not be safe....[102][[open endnotes in new window](#)]

Erasing Travers' adult life and creative work not only puts this inconvenient woman and her un-commodifiable work in their place, it makes more room in the film for nostalgic re-creations of the Disney studio at work—the talented pop songwriters Richard and Robert Sherman creating songs many in the audience love, and Uncle Walt giving his employees creative freedom while providing just the right amount of creative support from his office just down the hall. In other words, the film is an ad for *Mary Poppins* and brand-building corporate self-promotion as well as a story about the triumph of Walt Disney's universal vision for Mary Poppins over P.L. Travers' personalized and parochial version. The slogan on the poster and DVD cover for the film suggests these changes: "Where her book ended, their story began." And the film's title in many Spanish-speaking countries: *El Sueño de Walt* (*Walt's Dream*).[103] Travers' life and especially her stories become a kind of structuring absence, a constitutive gap that makes possible the film's apparent unity.[104] Using concepts for understanding such symptomatic absences, the film reveals fissures and contradictions connecting it to larger institutional issues, as I develop below.

Disney: history told by the victors

Not surprisingly, with all this advertising and brand-building to do, the film must make some major changes in the history as recounted by Lawson, Flanagan, Eliot and others. First, before she went to Los Angeles Travers had already signed over most of the rights to her books a year earlier, and she signed over more rights before she left. Second, in exchange for these rights she received what she needed most, the maximum amount of money her New York lawyers could extract from Disney: \$100,000 against 5% of the producer's gross receipts, an amount unheard of for the Disney studio, and a testament to how badly Disney wanted the rights.[105] Third, although Walt had already given her final script approval (and agreed that the film would contain no animation), he ignored all her proposed changes, and of course the film contains animation.[106] In fact, according to Richard Sherman, Disney went to his Smoke Tree Ranch in Palm Springs while Travers was there, leaving the writers alone to be "interrupted, corrected, bullied, and shamed" by Travers.[107]

"They could listen to Travers' ideas, and present their own, but they had no power to agree to anything that she wanted."

Finally, Travers cried at the world premiere of *Mary Poppins* but likely not for the reasons provided in *Saving Mr. Banks*. Instead of weeping at Disney's public redemption of her father, which according to *Saving Mr. Banks* she had been unable to accomplish with her own more feeble creative efforts, Travers more likely cried over what Disney had done to her work: it was "all fantasy and no magic." [109]

Thus there was far less at stake during Travers' visit to the Disney studio in March 1961 than the film depicts.[110] Like many another author negotiating with a movie studio, Travers fought for what she saw as the integrity of her work against a more powerful antagonist. But she had little bargaining leverage at this point, since she had already exchanged major property rights for what turned out to be enough money to make her rich for the rest of her life. Disney's *Mary Poppins* became a huge hit.

The Walt Disney Company's historical revisions in *Saving Mr. Banks* are much more than simple artistic license, more than a compression of all the decisions made years and continents apart into a classical dramatic unity of place and time. Disney and Travers, who came from such different worlds, were bound together in a familiar kind of capitalist social relation so familiar we often overlook it. They both needed the film to be a success, since Disney had bought not only a majority share in her property but her cooperation in maximizing its exchange value as well. So they feared, mistrusted, needed, cultivated and manipulated one another, while speaking more honestly in private. "Disney, she knew, could be ferocious. Once, when she made a disparaging remark, he turned on her with anger," reports Lawson.[111]

Disney didn't invite Travers to the premiere because he feared she would criticize the film to the press. She came anyway, trying as she would for the rest of her life to promote her books and her artistic vision, small in the glare of the big Disney parade.[112] After Walt died in 1966 she increasingly made her private criticisms of his films more public, yet her ambivalence kept returning. The Disney organization was both the destroyer of her best creative work and, she hoped, the way she might yet bring it to more people. In the eighties she worked with Brian Sibley on a script for a film sequel to *Mary Poppins*, but a deal with Disney fell through.[113] Only two years before she died in 1996, she sold the theatrical rights to *Mary Poppins* to the producer Cameron Mackintosh (*Cats*, *Les Misérables*), who said, "She realized I was her best chance." [114] Although she had specified that no Americans be involved, when the musical opened at the Prince Edward Theatre in London's West End in December 2004, it was a Disney co-production. The London production was called

"a strange and beautiful thing, containing an astonishing variety of moods and distinguished by a faithful rendering of the books' brisk and sophisticated comic sensibility." [115]

But the *New York Times* compared the 2006 Broadway production unfavorably with the "undiluted wonder" of the opening sequence of Disney's *The Lion King* on Broadway, noting that "every act of sorcery comes with a fortune-cookie life lesson attached." [116] Travers struggled against Disney even after death.

Disney: Travers threatens our beloved Mary Poppins

In the process of constructing its classical narrative, the Disney version of the making of *Mary Poppins* changes historical facts, emphases, and

interpretations to make an argument. And just as the Disney version of *Mary Poppins* eclipsed Travers' original stories in popularity and public memory, the Disney version of the making of *Mary Poppins* likewise eclipses the history of that making through its institutional domination of the channels of communication. *Saving Mr. Banks* revises history to change the balance of power in Travers' favor, emphasizing her bullying and pretending that she held the upper hand in her negotiations with Disney. This makes her look worse and Disney and his corporation look better, since they become innocent victims.

Whereas the historical Walt could largely ignore and manipulate Travers as Hollywood moguls typically did (and do) with writers and other employees, the Disney version of Walt is far less powerful. He was forced by this bullying and unreasonable woman to give in to her every whim until he takes time out of his busy schedule to save his film—one cherished by many in the audience—by figuring out what her problem is. The film tries to inoculate us against incredulity at this obvious hagiography by acknowledging that Walt is an old-fashioned guy who must ask his executive secretary for advice about women. But *Saving Mr. Banks* pretends that this woman writer had a lot more power against him than she did, and that she used it not to make a better film—isn't Disney's *Mary Poppins* practically perfect in every way?—but to make arbitrary demands and work out her personal issues. The real Travers was marked by her father's alcoholism and early death, but those traumas weren't nearly so central to her life or overdetermining of her life or her *Mary Poppins* stories, as *Saving Mr. Banks* argues.

The real P.L. Travers wasn't so dotty either, though she might have appeared so to Disney's writers. She was, however, desperately trying to save whatever she could of her own work though she was now merely a consultant within this "uneasy wedlock," as she called it, with a man and his corporation.

"Disney did not just buy the *Mary Poppins* story but swallowed it whole, as a shark takes a minnow." [117]

Disney: save the American family

While *Saving Mr. Banks* attempts to put a difficult real woman in her place and does major repair work on the patriarchal image of Walt Disney, it also symptomatically ignores major changes in the fictional characters of the Banks family in their move from P.L. Travers' stories to Disney's *Mary Poppins*. *Saving Mr. Banks* constantly cuts back and forth between the adult Travers and the travails of her early family life, and the Banks family in Travers' stories exists only in her hectoring lectures and questions to the Disney writers: The Banks' home should be less grand. Why does Mrs. Banks have to be a suffragette? And why must Mr. Banks be so mean as to tear up his children's letter? The historical Travers did indeed object to these things, yet in its ways of representing them, the film once again pays lip service to history while attempting to inoculate us against its power.

First, for Disney as for other Hollywood studios, the Banks' home must be grander than the one in Travers' story because they are selling escape into a

world that looks a lot like our world but is one class notch above it—more beautiful, with better clothes, furniture and other consumer goods.

Second, for Walt Disney, Mrs. Banks likely became a suffragette so he could poke fun at the feminists who were, in his conservative ideology, responsible for the breakdown in the family and the rise of divorce.[118] Although the beginning of the second wave feminist movement is usually dated as 1963, with the publication of Betty Friedan's influential *The Feminine Mystique*, an English translation of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* had been published in the United States in 1953. And by 1961 Friedan and others from or influenced by the left had been writing, talking publicly, and organizing around feminist issues for years. Walt Disney had increasingly though quietly identified with the conservative movement since the 1941 cartoonists' strike activated his anti-Communism. Disney films, always centered on idealized families, during the late fifties and sixties focused more often on internal as well as external threats to those imaginary families. In Disney's successful 1961 film *The Parent Trap*, for example, Hayley Mills plays identical twin teenagers who save their family by reuniting their divorced parents.

And finally, the Disney version of Mr. Banks—well, that's a bit more complicated.

Walt Disney believed that his U.S. audience wouldn't understand why a reasonable middle class family would turn their children over to a perfect stranger to be raised: a nanny. Mary Poppins had to become what Richard Sherman called a "necessary person,"[119] easily understandable by middle class U.S. viewers. So Disney and his writers made Mary into someone who could fix the family and then go away, and they were aided by the fact that Travers' Mary Poppins would often leave at the end of a story. In Walt's version of family values, modern U.S. families were threatened by mothers leaving their traditional place in the domestic sphere and fathers getting so involved with work and making money that they neglected their children.

So Mary had to save the Banks family, but from what? Whereas Mrs. Banks quickly changes from a silly suffragette to a subservient wife when the previous nanny quits, the change in Mr. Banks, the patriarch, forms the narrative arc of the whole film. He must be made mean at the beginning so that the children, with the magical help of Mary Poppins, can save him from himself and his job. By the end he realizes that he wants to spend more time with his family like a model mid-century American dad, Disney style. Disney's *Mary Poppins* was about changing Mr. (and Mrs.) Banks in order to save the American family.

Complexities and symptomatic contradictions

The historical context for the production of Disney's *Mary Poppins*, and Disney's version of that production in *Saving Mr. Banks*, is even more complex than I have indicated so far. Through an analysis of narrative, genre, hyper-commercial capitalist institutions, and larger issues of political-economic and cultural hegemony, the film's textual conflicts and contradictions—and the management of those contradictions—come into

focus. What follows below builds on [my visual essay in Part One](#) above.

Textual analyses of films and other cultural products often constitute displaced ways of talking and revealing assumptions about the social institutions and historical changes within which those texts are produced and received. Aesthetic approaches that argue or assume that the work of art will balance or harmonize external forces into formal elements suggest, implicitly or explicitly, that such art models the larger social and historical institutions within which it exists, institutions which are assumed to be legitimate and capable of harmonizing conflicting forces. Valuing aesthetic unity, stability, order, narrative closure and continuity, such arguments from conventional aesthetics are often deeply conservative and supportive of the political and economic status quo.

Variations on this model are more open and provisional, building uncertainty and incompleteness into their understandings of art, and accepting conflict and disunity to the point of celebrating them as aesthetic principles and social values. We might call these more liberal approaches to cultural products, including valuation of social problem films or many types of experimental films.

More radical approaches, however, are less likely to accept conventional textual or social models as legitimate or unifying. Instead, conflict in them rises beyond the level that can be contained within the level of narrative, character, or aesthetic form generally. Since they see the society generally as riven with structural conflicts, insupportable inequalities and deep, unmanageable contradictions, they are not likely to understand the cultural products of that society as ritual confirmations of its goodness. For these folks, where there is no justice in the society, there is not likely to be peace in the structure of its stories or songs.

Thus one of the most useful radical approaches to film and cultural analysis has been the concept of the *symptomatic analysis*. Usually combining Marx's social critique of class oppression under capitalism with a Freudian or Lacanian psychoanalysis of the symptoms of familial repression, this approach has generated the productive concept of the *structuring absence*. Rather than assuming that the cultural text will ratify the social context within which it exists, this concept looks for what the collective or institutional (not personal) text cannot say, what it signifies by what is missing from it. Applied in influential works like the *Cahiers du Cinema* analysis of *Young Mr. Lincoln* and later, similar scholarship, it has yielded important radical insights that constitute an alternative tradition to more conventional aesthetic approaches.

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Symptomatic and structuring excess in *Saving Mr. Banks*

We can extend and reconsider this tradition by looking more closely at symptomatic contradictions in *Saving Mr. Banks*, beginning at the level of narrative and its conventional building block, character. In conventional aesthetic terms, one of the more obvious problems with this film is a perceived imbalance between the two parts of its narrative. Several reviewers pointed to it: The long flashbacks to Travers' childhood in Australia are significantly longer than narratively necessary, and melodramatically excessive. They form a full narrative continuity in the past that overwhelms Travers' present narrative with childhood guilt and trauma. Furthermore, they are often drenched in the sentimental light of memory and topped with insistent music to drive each repetitive point home again and again.

These flashbacks *symptomatically over-explain and oversimplify* the adult Travers, who otherwise usually seems a much more complex and conventionally interesting character. If the point is to explain and evoke the reasons for the adult Travers' behavior in the 1961 story, the film spends way too much time and stylistic energy doing so. That is, rather than saying too little, here the text says too much. Instead of a structuring absence, *Saving Mr. Banks* evidences *a structuring excess*. If the film is a social rather than a strictly personal symptom, then it prompts us to ask: What might cause this excess?

To begin with the simplest explanation first, with the script's genealogy: the producer of a 2002 documentary about Travers, the Australian Ian Collie, commissioned a screenplay by Sue Smith. The project migrated to BBC Films and Ruby Films, where producer Alison Owen hired Kelly Marcel to co-write the script. After several rewrites, the screenplay was good enough to make the Blacklist in 2011, voted by producers as one of the best un-produced screenplays in Hollywood.^[121][\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) It was acquired and quickly produced by Disney, where the director, John Lee Hancock, removed one or two scripted scenes set in Australia, which Marcel attributes to her sentimentalizing, "overegging the pudding."^[122] Since it is generally the Australia scenes that sentimentalize and simplify the 1961 story, some of the reasons for the excess of those scenes may lie in the origins of the project.

However, this seems an inadequate explanation for such a significant structural and stylistic problem, which is more likely to be found in the more proximate influence of the Walt Disney Company on the internal structure of its intellectual property. As Marcel acknowledges, Walt Disney is not the

antagonist to the fictional Travers' protagonist; the internally conflicted Travers is her own antagonist.[123] Conventional wisdom dictates that the more complex and multifaceted the antagonist (not necessarily a villain), the better the story. (This is because conventional classical narrative requires exterior conflict between protagonist and antagonist, generating action; if the conflict becomes too interiorized within the protagonist, or becomes more social or institutional, the film becomes less conventional and commodified, resembling art cinema.)

But here is the crux of the problem: the Walt Disney Company puts very narrow, overdetermined limits on the representation of its founder. *Saving Mr. Banks* must update the simulacrum of Walt Disney, key to its brand and a construct into which the corporation has poured enormous resources for many decades. (A symptom of the corporation's power in this situation is Marcel's excessive praise of the company as "incredibly brave" for showing him drinking and smoking, "and I love them for it.") [124]

So in conventional terms, the film must locate virtually all conflict and complexity within its protagonist, since it is prohibited from exploring major conflicts and complexities in Walt Disney, including the well-documented historical ones. This unbalances the film, oversimplifying Walt Disney, who logically should be a complex antagonist rather than an idealized therapist. In the process Pamela Travers becomes, contradictorily, both a complex adult and someone totally controlled by her past, over-explained with excessive flashbacks. As one critic put it,

"[The Australian story] is thick with dubious sentiment and leavened with glimmers of sensitive wisdom, but the light it casts on the grown-up Mrs. Travers is harshly literal. The film asks us to believe that she is at once an astute storyteller and an emotional automaton entirely lacking in psychological insight." [125]

The very commercial imperatives of brand building work here against the conventions of commercial classical narrative.

To put this a different way: A Hollywood commercial imperative, even stronger in Disney movies, dictates that the main character must be likeable, someone with whom you can identify and empathize. Disney is trying, despite its institutional mandate to merchandise everything, to occasionally make movies for grownups. This film suggests how difficult the company finds such a process, especially when the film is about itself.[126] Since Travers is so often unpleasant, unhappy, and even mean in order to make Walt, his writers and his beloved film of *Mary Poppins* into her innocent victims, perhaps the only way to make her more sympathetic is to explain, over and over again in symptomatic overcompensation, why she's only acting that way because she doesn't want to let her father down again. Kelly Marcel confirms the filmmakers' need to make Travers more likeable, noting that the small but important character of Ralph, the limousine driver, was added "late in the first draft...because somebody's got to like her besides Mickey Mouse," [127] Mickey being the stuffed toy who seems to be her only friend.

Managing contradictions and conflicts

However, it's important not to overstate the salience of this symptomatic excess. Though it may cause some viewers to enjoy the film less than they might, most are not likely to understand the causes of the problem if they do notice it, since they lack a critical conceptual framework with which to connect this insight with other, larger issues. So this symptomatic excess is probably a minor and manageable contradiction within the film's reception. Given the film's commercial success, the mission of this mission statement has likely been accomplished. As a social text, the film is perhaps being asked to fulfill some contradictory functions, which must be managed not to erase them, but to limit them to marginal notice (like this essay!) or frame them in conventional terms as aesthetic flaws.

Thus it is useful to emphasize not the symptomatic contradictions and conflicts among the parts of the film, but the ways the film ideologically manages these problems—not to make them disappear to everyone but to marginalize them, to construct a reassuring consensus around the film. In this the film at the micro-level may operate in ways analogous to its parent corporation at the macro-level, both of them necessarily generating contradictions that need not be made invisible but only marginal within the public marketplace. I say necessarily because, under the increasingly intensified commodification of consumer capitalism, big-budget studio films are more and more likely to become unstable pastiches of heterogeneous genres, narrative fragments, star personae and visual styles. Each element is designed to appeal to a different demographic or advertise some different merchandise, and the whole package is lightly overlaid with the residual patina of a unified work of art. Viewers are likely to be expecting less a unified aesthetic experience (whatever that is) than a series of “intensities” or pleasurable impressions lightly strung together.[128] Certainly *Saving Mr. Banks* demonstrates some of these characteristics.

And at the macro-level, a global corporation as large as Disney can manage its precious brand without erasing or even minimizing every contradiction in corporate behavior. If some Americans and Europeans don't like the company's racist or sexist products or its exploitative labor practices, it probably matters less as long as a lot of Chinese don't complain. And there's limited evidence that consumers acting as citizens, asking Disney to act like a corporate citizen as well, have had much direct influence on Disney's behavior.

Mythically resolving conflicts: the musical genre and the melodrama

A complementary perspective that emphasizes the mythical or ideological resolution of social conflicts centers on genre. In her analysis of the classic (especially MGM) musical, Jane Feuer demonstrates its reflexive, self-justifying qualities. Musicals collapse the distance between movie performers spontaneously singing and dancing their feelings, the audiences for those performances represented in the films, and the audiences of the musicals

themselves. And many if not most of these films are backstage musicals, about putting on a show, which happens to be the show we are seeing. Musicals often celebrate themselves and the musical genre itself.[129]

We can understand *Saving Mr. Banks* in generic terms as a domestic melodrama about P.L. Travers' traumatized family in the past threatening to destroy Walt Disney's vision for the family in *Mary Poppins* in the film's present and future. And Disney's vision is *Mary Poppins* as a musical, with the future realized and the family saved through the symbolic triumph of the musical genre over the melodrama. The world premiere of the musical that is his *Mary Poppins* climactically relegates Travers' family melodrama to the dead past, reflexively justifying the value of the musical genre itself as the last shots show the young Helen Goff saying farewell to the past and her now-redeemed father. Thus the tragic family melodrama from the past frames *Saving Mr. Banks* at beginning, end, and throughout, with a 1961 backstage comedy/drama trying to emerge from inside it, and an already beloved 1964 Disney musical comedy trying to emerge from both. As a backstage musical, the film parallels the maturation of the show, seen in script conferences and initial performances, with the maturation of the trauma in the past that threatens to prevent the show from realization. To the backstage musical element the film adds a bit of the more recent "making-of" genre, trying to activate the audience's nostalgia for *Mary Poppins*.

Thus *Saving Mr. Banks* can be usefully understood as a hybrid of the family melodrama and the musical that performs a kind of competition between these two genres, with the 1961 backstage comedy/drama mediating between them. Although historically P.L. Travers' life and writings were not melodramatic, Disney's film associates her with this genre. And since Disney films are usually musicals about characters who sing and dance their feelings, the film associates Disney with the musical genre. Walt takes Travers to Disneyland, and she begins to smile as they ride on a musical carousel that reminds her of a happy moment in her youth. Then, as the conflicts between Travers and Disney's writers sharpen and Travers reveals her key melodramatic goal not to let her father down again, the writers respond by turning the writing room into a musical performance space, along with the receptionist singing and dancing Travers' heart's desire, and Travers joins them in singing and dancing "Let's Go Fly a Kite." They successfully counter the relative realism of melodrama with the utopian stylization of the musical, with its expressive unity of emotion, character and performer (and, hopefully, viewer).

A key Disney commodity: musical comedy, mixing live action and animation

Complementing the narrativized competition between genres is a parallel contrast between live action and animation. Travers' hostility to having her *Mary Poppins* singing and dancing is overcome when she saves her father, in imagination, through singing and dancing, but she still cannot accept cartoons. However, a central element in the Disney commodity is musical comedy plus animation, and everyone agrees that Travers cried during the

film's premiere showing. So although Travers herself (confirmed by Marcel) says she cried because she disliked the film, *Saving Mr. Banks* makes Travers' tears into her climactic catharsis, the fulfillment of Walt's paternal promise and the final redemption of her own Mr. Banks. Feuer says that the musical film mythically resolves all social conflicts within the utopian stylization of performance, and Disney's addition of animation adds a further level of stylized fantasy to the musical genre as cartoon penguins dance with live action characters. Drawings and human actors are harmonized through Disney magic, figuring the harmonizing of more mundane and earthly conflicts. But as Walt, at the premiere sitting behind Travers and noticing that she is sobbing as Mr. Banks is saved onscreen, tries to comfort her, she says, "I can't abide cartoons," thus denying what viewers are likely to understand as her true feelings.

Like Walt in this scene, viewers are invited to conclude that you just can't make everybody happy. While *Saving Mr. Banks* reflexively celebrates the musical genre within itself and the genre's magical ability to transcend the gulf between live action and animation, it identifies and labels the adults who resist, or claim to resist, its magic. They are a small, marginal group that resists the full, transcendent Disney happiness. Though Walt has saved her Mr. Banks and rejuvenated her life, she is less than grateful, the film suggests. Since the company has made untold billions through Disneyfying dozens of stories in the public domain, and bought many others cheaply from their authors, it is tempting to speculate that this ending, while on its surface redemptive, also constitutes a kind of corporate revenge on a stubborn author who fought them, took them, needed them and fought them some more for a half century. After her death, the corporation gets the last word.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes

Part I: visual essay

1. Special thanks to Clay Steinman and Suzanne Sheber as well as the editors of *Jump Cut* for invaluable editing, advice and support on this project. In addition, thanks to the folks at <http://disneyscreencaps.com> for the images from *Saving Mr. Banks*.
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93. Jeff Goldsmith, “*Saving Mr. Banks* Q&A [with Kelly Marcel],” *The Q&A with Jeff Goldsmith*. December 24, 2013. App. minute 30:00.

<http://www.theqandapodcast.com/2013/12/saving-mr-banks-q.html>. Accessed December 11, 2014.

94. Goldsmith, Q&A (with Marcel), app. minute 49:30.

95. For example, Marcel says, “I was relieved when [the script] sold to Disney, but also scared they would sanitize it.” Goldsmith, Q&A. App. minute 38:50.

96. Flanagan.

97. Flanagan.

98. Lawson, 85-139.

99. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*. New York, Harcourt Brace & Co., 1989, p. 4.

100. Margy Rochlin, "Not Quite All Spoonfuls of Sugar: Tom Hanks and Emma Thompson Discuss *Saving Mr. Banks*." *The New York Times*. Jan. 3, 2014.

http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/05/movies/awardsseason/tom-hanks-and-emma-thompson-discuss-saving-mr-banks.html?_r=0. August 30, 2014.

See also, for example, "Emma Thompson – *Saving Mr. Banks* Interview (2014).

http://www.best-videos-youtube.com/emma-thompson-saving-mr-banks-interview-2014-video_f85bd9692.html. August 30, 2014.

101. Schickel, 349-351.

102. "Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious." Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in Hannah Arendt, ed. *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York, Schocken, 1969, 255. [[return to page 5 of critical essay](#)]

103. "*Saving Mr. Banks* (2013) Release Info."

http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2140373/releaseinfo?ref_=tt_ov_inf. May 11, 2014.

104. The concept of structuring absence seems to have originated in the psychoanalytic work of Jacques Lacan. It was taken up by the Marxist theorist Louis Althusser, and then entered film studies through the influential study of the film *Young Mr. Lincoln* by the editors of the French film journal *Cahiers du Cinema* (*Cinema Notebooks*), published in English as *A Collective Text* by the Editors of *Cahiers du Cinema*, "John Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln*," *Screen* 13, Autumn 1972, pp. 5-44.

"What follows in their analytic essay is a scene-by-scene breakdown that repeatedly emphasizes the gap between the most apparent level of narration and deeper, more contradictory, aspects of the unfolding film. In particular these are revealed by 'structuring absences,' things that are repressed by the film: particularly politics and sexuality. The idea of a structuring absence—something that signifies although it is not present—is probably the most influential part of the *Cahiers* approach. The concept opens up analysis to not just mimicking or mirroring what a film says overtly, but to looking for that which it cannot address."

Chuck Kleinhans, "*Young Mr. Lincoln* and ideological analysis: a reconsideration (with many asides)," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*. 55, Fall 2013, p. 2.

<http://www.ejumpcut.org/currentissue/>

KleinhansCahiersInContext/index.html, August 31, 2014.

105. Lawson, 242-248, 254.

106. Eliot, 258; Lawson, 242.

107. Flanagan.

108. Flanagan.

109. Flanagan; Lawson, 272-276; Marcel confirms that, rather than having a cathartic experience at the premiere of Disney's *Mary Poppins*, Travers "hated the film." Jeff Goldsmith (2013), "Saving Mr. Banks Q&A [with Kelly Marcel]," *The Q&A with Jeff Goldsmith*. December 24, 2013. (Approximately minute 45:00).

<http://www.theqandapodcast.com/2013/12/saving-mr-banks-q.html>. Accessed August 19, 2014.

110. For further documentation of the extensive differences between *Saving Mr. Banks* and the best historical accounts, see "Saving Mr. Banks: Production: Historical Accuracy," *Wikipedia*.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saving_Mr._Banks. August 31, 2014.

111. Lawson, 276.

112. Flanagan; Lawson, 269-280.

113. Flanagan.

114. Flanagan.

115. Flanagan.

116. Ben Brantley, "Meddler on the Roof," *The New York Times*, Nov. 17, 2006.

http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/17/theater/reviews/17popp.html?_r=0. May 12, 2014.

117. Lawson, 242, 244.

118. Flanagan.

119. Flanagan.

120. Flanagan.

121. "Saving Mr. Banks: Production: Development," *Wikipedia*.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saving_Mr._Banks. August 31, 2014. [[return to p. 6 of critical essay](#)]

122. Goldsmith, Q&A (with Marcel), app. minute 12.

123. Goldsmith, Q&A (with Marcel), app. minute 26:20.

124. Goldsmith, Q&A (with Marcel), app. minute 39:00.

125. Scott, “An Unbeliever.”

126. And who is more likeable, who more able to manage the structural contradictions of *Saving Mr. Banks*, than Tom Hanks? In this odd interview response, he makes it sound like the Walt Disney Company was virtually forced to make the film. What he calls “straightforward” sounds on reflection like anything but straightforward.

“Margy Rochlin: Meanwhile, Tom, you’re playing the fellow who created the company whose movie it is. Can you walk us through what sounds like a strange job offer?

Tom Hanks: It was incredibly straightforward. [Disney’s chief executive, Robert A. Iger, called and] said: ‘Look, we have a bit of a circumstance here. We have to make this movie about Walt Disney. We didn’t develop it. It came to us from somewhere else. It’s a great script, and if we don’t do it, that means somebody else might be able to do it, and we’re going to look heartless. But if we quash it, we’ll look like we’re trying to hide something. So will you play Walt Disney?’”

Rochlin.

http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/05/movies/awardsseason/tom-hanks-and-emma-thompson-discuss-saving-mr-banks.html?_r=0. August 31, 2014.

127. Goldsmith, Q&A (with Marcel), app. minute 23:30.

128. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, Duke University Press, 1991, pp. 1-54.

129. Jane Feuer, “The Self-Reflexive Musical and the Myth of Entertainment,” in Grant, Barry Keith, ed. *Film Genre Reader II*. Austin, University of Texas Press, 1995, pp. 441-455.

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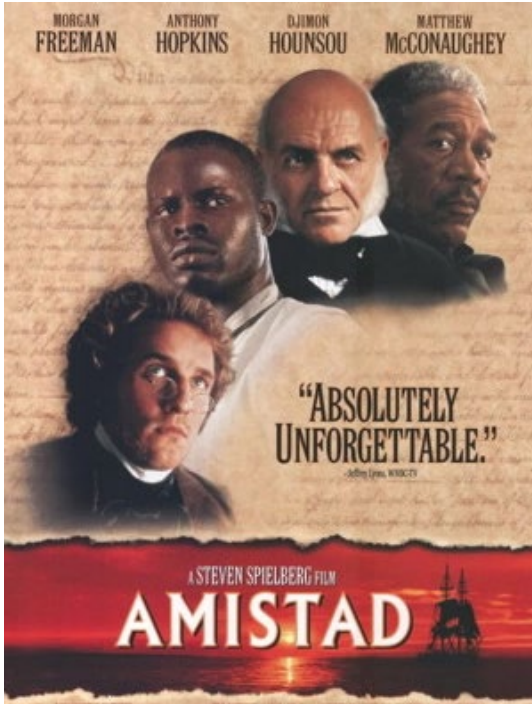
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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The horrors of slavery and modes of representation in *Amistad* and *12 Years a Slave*

by [Douglas Kellner](#)



Spielberg's *Amistad*

Solomon Northup's testimonial *12 Years a Slave* (1853) tells the heart-wrenching story of how a free black man living in New York State was captured by slave traders and forced to live as a slave on southern plantations in the 1840s under inhuman and oppressive conditions.[1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Writing up and publishing his experiences, Northup presents a searing portrayal of the evils of slavery that influenced abolitionist arguments and movements in the pre-Civil War period as debates over slavery intensified, leading to the bloodiest war in U.S. history. Steve McQueen's 2013 film provides a powerful cinematic rendition of Northup's *12 Years a Slave* and has been affirmed as one of the one most powerful films on slavery ever produced, winning the Academy Award for best picture, and multiple other awards in 2013.[3]

In this article, I will contrast Gordon Parks' relatively unknown PBS "American Experience" film of 1984 *Solomon Northup's Odyssey* with McQueen's film, although I open with a look back at Steven Spielberg's *Amistad* (1998), which presents a 1839 slave revolt on a ship bound to the Americas and the subsequent trial of the rebels. The *Amistad* rebellion and trial, like Northup's book, influenced the abolitionist movement and is a significant, although often forgotten moment in U.S. history. Hence, the current discussions of McQueen's highly acclaimed film provide the opportunity for a look backwards at a painful moment in U.S. history, and for discussion of different modes of cinematic representation of slavery. Accordingly, I will contrast Spielberg's film with Parks and McQueen's presentations of slavery in their versions of Northup's *12 Years a Slave*. Although Spielberg's *Amistad* contains many features of dominant U.S. ideology and an individualist Hollywood narrative which informs Spielberg's liberal cinema, it is perhaps the most modernist and one of the most compelling of Spielberg's films that deserves a second look and comparison with Park and McQueen's *12 Years a Slave*.

I will accordingly first examine *Amistad* which provides a broader panorama of the system and complex effects of slavery in U.S. life and history than Parks' powerful narrative of Northup's book and McQueen's more concentrated and intense focus on the horrors of slavery in *12 Years a Slave*. I contrast Parks' use of classical realist modes of representation with McQueen's aestheticized and modernist version.[4] Juxtaposing different cinematic representations of slavery and cinematic renditions of Northup's slave testimony, I show how McQueen's film provides a

modernist version of Northup's text that forces the audience to experience the horrors of slavery, while Parks uses a more conventional realist narrative to tell Northrop's story and depict the institutions of slavery. These films, I believe, are among the best English-language cinematic efforts to engage the "peculiar" and arguably monstrous U.S. institution of slavery that continues to shape our history today into the Obama era.

Steven Spielberg's *Amistad*

Spielberg's historical epic *Amistad* depicts the utter inhumanity of slavery through the story of an almost forgotten 1839 slave revolt aboard a Spanish slave ship off the coast of Cuba. A cargo of Africans who had been captured in Sierra Leone, loaded into a slave trader that sailed to Havana, sold into slavery in Cuba, and put aboard the ship *La Amistad* to be transported to a life of slavery on the other side of the island of Cuba, revolted and took over the ship. Many of the crew and the blacks working with them were killed, although two of the Spanish crew were spared to help the rebels navigate the ship to what was hoped would be a safe port. The Spaniards, however, managed to aim the direction of the seized ship toward North America where it was boarded by U.S. naval troops off the coast of Long Island, who arrested the mutineers and took them to prison in New London, Connecticut. There, they would go on trial in a media spectacle that captured the attention of the nation and furiously fuelled the fateful national controversy over slavery.[5]



Enchained slaves in *Amistad*

La Amistad is ironically the Spanish word for "friendship," while the story of the *Amistad* rebellion demonstrates the unfriendly and inhuman nature of the slave trade. In Spielberg's narrative, "Amistad" also refers to the friends of the Africans in the abolitionist movement, who saw the inhumanity of slavery and joined with rebellious slaves to fight and abolish the institution of slavery. The *Amistad* rebellion and the subsequent trial played a significant role in mobilizing abolitionists at the time, and thus was a significant event leading to the Civil War, as anti-slavery forces strongly side with the rebels while pro-slavery forces sided with the ship

owners and Spanish government which demanded the return of the ship and prisoners.

As historian Marcus Rediker notes, the story of the Amistad rebellion was well-known in the build-up to the Civil War with abolitionists and journalists writing extensively on the event, playwrights, novelists, and songwriters memorializing the rebellion and the trial, and with the public closely following the long trial and its aftermath. Yet by the 20th century, Rediker claims that the story of the Amistad rebellion was largely forgotten until Spielberg's film brought again the story to wide public attention.[6]

Spielberg tells how the film's producer Debbie Allen brought the story to him, and that he saw it as a serious epic history lesson that should be presented to the U.S. public.[7] Spielberg had just begun his new Dreamworks studio and sought a prestige property that would help promote his studio as a producer of important movies. He was at the time one of the most important and influential Hollywood directors with megahits like *Jaws* (1975), *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), the *Indiana Jones* franchise (1981, 1984, 1989, 2008), *E.T.* (1982) and the *Jurassic Park* films (1993 and 1997 with the 2008 film directed by Joe Johnson). Spielberg had also attempted to make more serious films like *The Color Purple* (1985), based on Alice Walker's novel of a young black woman growing up in the South, and *Empire of the Sun* (1987), a rendering of J.G. Ballard's semi-autobiographical novel of growing up in Shanghai during the Japanese occupation in World War II. While these films received a mixed audience and critical reception, his film *Schindler's List* (1993), about a German businessman who saved Jews in the Second World War, received enthusiastic reviews and won Spielberg his first Academy Awards for Best Director and Best Picture. *Amistad* thus follows Spielberg's practice of mixing serious epic historical dramas with his more popular entertainment films, taking on an important episode in the revolt against slavery and struggles toward freedom and equality in U.S. history.

Amistad opens dramatically during a storm, highlighted by flashing strobe-effect lighting in the opening sequence, which cuts to a close-up that turns out to be the eyes of a black man. Spielberg cuts rapidly, showing splotches of blood on the man's hand, a metal nail being ripped out of the plank of the deck, followed by a long shot of the man using the nail to break the lock of the manacles that bound him to the ship. Cinque frees another, and a rapid montage shows groups of black men breaking free of the manacles that had kept them in bondage.[9] With dramatic music, thunder and lightening, fragmentary images, and quick cutting, the modernist opening produces a jarring sense of dislocation, intensified as the blacks are torn loose from their chains and appear on deck, resolved to take over the ship.

The fast editing, strobe-like effects during the storm, and dramatic action continue as the black men attack the ship's captain who fires back, hitting two of the attackers and stabbing one with a bayonet attached to the end of his rifle. The white captain is overpowered, however, by the rebellious Africans, and he is stabbed to death by a powerful black man who emerges as the leader of the slave revolt and who will eventually be introduced to



The noble Cinque

the audience as Joseph Cinque (Djimon Hounsou), who emerges as the central figure of the film.

The initial uprising depicts the group effort of the rebels who fight the ship's armed crew with knives, sabers, and sticks, seizing control through guerilla like action. Yet the image of a powerful leader is highlighted during the rebellion sequence, first, beginning the literal process of freeing the Africans from their chains, and then in images of Cinque standing out from the group and framed in heroic poses, illuminated by bright lighting, and thunderous music during the uprising. Throughout the film, Cinque will be positioned as the natural leader of the rebels who is the center of cinematic representation and the key narrative link between the major characters.

Spielberg and cinematographer Janusz Kaminski reportedly constructed the film's visual style by deploying images from the paintings of Francisco Goya, whose horrors of war and incarceration pictures helped shape opening images of the Africans' imprisonment in the ship and revolt, and then the later prison scenes during the trial.[10] Spielberg and his crew also intended to provide accurate historical representations of the Amistad rebellion and subsequent trial and to tell much of the story from the standpoint of the Africans.[11]

The opening and succeeding images portray the Africans as radically other to the white-skinned Europeans involved in the slave trade and the Americans who must sort out their fate through machinations in the U.S. political and legal system. The African sounds and language are initially untranslatable and frightening to Western ears, and throughout the film the incommunicability between the Africans, their Spanish slave-trading captors, and the Americans putting the African rebels on trial in their mysterious justice system is highlighted. Yet the film's fierce humanism eventually establishes communication and understanding between the African captives and their abolitionist U.S. allies who work to free the rebellious slaves and enable their return to Africa.[12]

After the dark, stormy, and Goyaesque opening sequence, the film flashes a title "1839" and cuts to a clear blue sky and placid sea, as the rebels wake up in charge of the ship. For a brief period of time, the Africans control the Amistad and attempt to direct it back toward Africa, but the treacherous Spanish ship owners Ruiz and Montez, who they saved, cleverly sail West toward the sun (and presumably Africa) in the day, but tack North at night toward America. A title "Six weeks" follows with the ship short on water, and when they come upon Long Island, New York, a strange sequence shows rich Americans on a yacht enjoying a dinner with black servants and classical music, while the liberated slave ship passes by and both sides look upon the other in wonder, highlighting the class and cultural differences between the groups. The Amistad rebels freedom is about to come to an end, however. When Cinque and some of the rebels go ashore to get fresh water, a U.S. Navy vessel encounters the Amistad, and the sailors observe that it is manned by a motley crew of black people. The Americans board the ship, seize it, and arrest all the rebels who will go on trial for mutiny and murder.

The rest of Spielberg's *Amistad* unfolds as a legal drama, with scenes cutting from the bright lighting in courtrooms and law offices to grimmer scenes of the rebels in prison. Initially, wealthy abolitionists Theodore Joadson (Morgan Freeman) and Lewis Tappan (Stellan Skarsgard)[13] attempt to persuade former U.S. president John Quincy Adams (Anthony



The Abolitionists

Hopkins) to defend the rebels, but he declines, portrayed as more interested in cultivating exotic plants in a greenhouse garden than involving himself in demanding struggles in the public sphere. Eventually, the abolitionists sign up a real estate lawyer Roger Sherman Baldwin (Matthew McConaughey) to defend the rebels, and in the film he provides a highly articulate and ultimately effective defense, focusing on the issue of property, and whether the rebels belonged to the ship owners or not.[14]

Amistad establishes the geo-political framework of the legal case in a striking shot that cuts from a close-up of Cinque's gleaming eyes in captivity to the eyes of a young woman looking at her reflection on a metal object, and an establishing shot shows her to be Isabella, the Queen of Spain (Anna Paquin). The U.S. President Martin van Buren (Nigel Hawthorne) is first depicted as having no interest whatsoever in the *Amistad* case and the freedom of the African captives, and throughout is represented as weak and vacillating, fearing losing Southern votes in his re-election campaign if he sides with the Africans and apparently having no strong convictions concerning slavery and freedom of blacks.

The *Amistad* case is depicted as proceeding fitfully through the U.S. legal system which is portrayed as strange and confusing from the point of view of the Africans. Their initial encounter with their abolitionist allies show them perceiving the hymn-singing and praying Christian abolitionists as "miserable" and sickly, and confronted with their voluble young lawyer Baldwin they think he looks and acts like an "elephant dung scraper," although later one concludes that perhaps this is what they need. After a federal District Court in New Haven rules that the *Amistad* rebels are guilty of "insurrection on the high seas," and will not be released, the *Amistad* captives are understandably confused and angry, and they are condemned to stand trial in a complicated court case.



The lawyer (Matthew McConaughey) and his clients

Spielberg's film conveys the convoluted legal claims of property ownership by Spain, the United States, the Spanish owners of the slaves and of *La Amistad*, and the U.S. captain and first mate of the US ship that took the *Amistad* rebels into custody. Scenes with the Spanish Queen Isabella II, whose government are demanding return of the ship and the slaves, and U.S. president Martin van Buren dramatize the geopolitical dimensions of the case, while a dinner with van Buren and southern slave apologist Senator John Calhoun (D-SC) highlight the domestic issues involved in the *Amistad* trial. At a dinner for the U.S. political elite, Calhoun explains to the Spanish ambassador Calderon that the Northern states consider pro-slavery Southerners as "immoral" and inferior, which Calhoun claims may be so in terms of amassing wealth. But, Calhoun asserts to the crowd, taking a dig at rich Northerners, eliminating slavery could well destroy the U.S. economy and a anti-slavery conclusion to the *Amistad* affair might lead to Civil War in the U.S..

Aware of the political stakes, van Buren and his allies plot to put what they think is a sympathetic and malleable Judge in charge of the case. Lengthy courtroom scenes follow with the *Amistad* defense stressing that the slaves are not property but are humans, and, moreover, the *Amistad* rebels were

not slaves on Cuban plantations as the prosecution, Spanish government, and slave traders Ruiz and Montez claim. The defense argues that their defendants are Africans who were captured in their native land, sold into captivity, and brought to Cuba where they were purchased and sent on the *Amistad* to journey to their new place of enslavement on the other side of Cuba. The trial proceeds fitfully and in one dramatic scene, Cinque stands up and repeatedly says “give us free, give us free,” dramatizing the element of struggle for freedom involved in the case.[15]

The theme of “home” and return to home has long been a major theme in Spielberg’s films and informs the thematic of *Amistad*. One of the most poignant sequences of the film unfolds as Baldwin attempts to bond with Cinque and learn about his home and his experiences. Flashbacks in bright light show a happy Cinque with his wife and children in a green and verdant Africa, followed by harrowing scenes of his capture and the infamous Middle Passage across the Atlantic from Africa to the Americas. This dramatic sequence demonstrates the monstrous conditions of the Passage, with Africans packed into a space below deck without proper food, water, exercise, or ventilation. One slave is shown throwing himself overboard in utter despair. Another sequence shows the slave traders flinging a packet of rocks into the ocean, followed by enchained slaves, drowning individuals who were sick or they could not feed. In a courtroom scene, a British captain, who had manned British slave patrol ships off the shore of Sierra Leone to intercept illegal slave ships, testified that it was common to throw rebellious, sick, or slaves they could not properly feed overboard and that the inventory of the *Tecora*, the slave ship that brought over the *Amistad* captives to Cuba, demonstrated that a significant number of slaves had been discarded on the voyage.

The *Amistad* defense convincingly makes the case that the rebels are Africans who were captured and enslaved against their will, and the young Judge rules that Ruiz and Montez are guilty of illegal slave trade and will be imprisoned at once, while the Africans are free to go home at the expense of the U.S. government. The joy is short-lived for van Buren and the U.S. government appeal the ruling and throw the case up to the Supreme Court. Again demonstrating the cultural difference and otherness between the blacks and whites, Baldwin has difficulty in explaining the U.S. legal system to Cinque who is understandably outraged by the decision, but is heartened to learn that a “big chief,” John Quincy Adams, a former President, will help defend him. A subsequent scene shows Cinque meeting Adams in his beloved greenhouse, and an African violet provide a bond of understanding between the two and hope that the Africans will eventually be able to return home.

John Quincy Adams begins his appeal to the Supreme Court by noting that Baldwin had clearly articulated the key issues in the case, but he makes a



The Great Man, John Quincy Adams

rousing presentation that justice has not been done in the case. Adams notes that letters from Spanish Queen Isabella constantly refer to our “incompetent courts,” and Adams mockingly suggests that she apparently wants a court that does what she wants. The argument that the independence of U.S. courts is a virtue of the system was made in the film earlier when as an aside at a dinner party, a Spanish diplomat complained about the problems with the U.S. “independent” courts, and a gentleman affirms that this is precisely their virtue, an argument made in the concluding scenes of *Amistad*.

In the culminating crescendo to his speech Adams deftly situates the trial in the context of the American revolution, while answering an argument made recently in the U.S. government journal *Executive Review* which argues that slavery goes back to ancient times and is the “natural state of mankind.” Adams retort that instead it is *freedom* which is the natural state and “the proof is the lengths to which a man will go to regain it once taken.” Raising his voice, Adams thunders:

“He will break loose his chains. He will decimate his enemies.
He will try and try and try against all odds, against all adversity
to get home.”

Obviously, Cinque and the Amistad rebels are the referent here, and Adams concludes his case to free them and allow them to go home by evoking the Constitution and Declaration of Independence with its ringing affirmation that “All men are created equal [with] inalienable rights... life, liberty’ and so on and so forth.” Recalling a conversation with Cinque the previous evening, he notes that “when the Mende encounter a situation where there appears no hope at all, he invokes his ancestors.” Clinching his argument Adams appeals to U.S. tradition, walking to a wall with portraits of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, his father John Adams, and other founding fathers. Noting how he rarely invoked his father, Adams concludes:

“We desperately need your strength and wisdom to triumph
over our fears, our prejudices, ourselves. Give us the courage to
do what is right and if it means civil war? Then let it come. And
when it does, may it be, finally, the last battle of the American
Revolution.”

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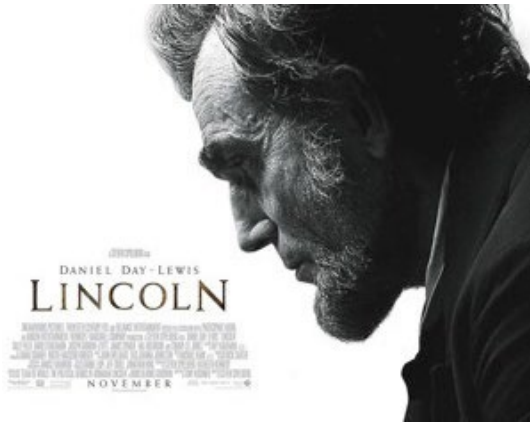
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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Spielberg's *Lincoln*

Shortly thereafter, the Supreme Court renders its verdict and the Amistad slaves and their supporters nervously go to the Court, knowing that seven of the nine Justices are Southern slaveholders. Justice Story brings down the gavel and renders the verdict, first, addressing the property issue and ruling “they are not slaves, and therefore cannot be considered merchandise.” This judgment captures the courtroom’s rapt attention as the Chief Justice concludes that the Amistad Africans

“are rather free individuals with certain legal and moral rights, including the right to engage in insurrection against those who would deny them their freedom. Therefore, it is our judgment, with one dissension that the defendants are to be released from custody at once. And, if they so choose, be returned to their homes in Africa.”

Judge Story brought down the gavel, the courtroom dispersed, and Steven Spielberg has closed his argument, providing ideological legitimization of the U.S. system of justice. As Spielberg’s *Lincoln* (2012) attempted to demonstrate that the political process in the United States works through its detailed dissection of the complicated process whereby President Lincoln and his team mobilized votes in Congress to pass the controversial and divisive 13th Amendment,^[17] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) in *Amistad*, the narrative makes the argument that despite all the complexities and competing interests, the U.S. legal and political system is rooted in a functioning system of constitutional democracy that provides justice for all. Such an ideological conclusion was contested by historian Eric Foner who argues that:

“The film gives the distinct impression that the Supreme Court was convinced by Adams’ plea to repudiate slavery in favor of the natural rights of man, thus taking a major step on the road to abolition.”

“In fact, the *Amistad* case revolved around the Atlantic slave trade—by 1840 outlawed by international treaty—and had nothing whatever to do with slavery as a domestic institution. Incongruous as it may seem, it was perfectly possible in the nineteenth century to condemn the importation of slaves from Africa while simultaneously defending slavery and the flourishing slave trade within the United States.”

“In October 1841, in an uncanny parallel to events on the *Amistad*, American slaves being transported from Virginia to Louisiana on the Creole seized control of the ship, killing some crew members and directing the mate to sail to the Bahamas. For fifteen years, American Secretaries of State unsuccessfully badgered British authorities to return the slaves as both murderers and ‘the recognized property’ of American citizens. This was far more typical of the government’s stance toward slavery than the *Amistad* affair.”

“Rather than being receptive to abolitionist sentiment, the courts were among the main defenders of slavery. A majority of the *Amistad* justices, after all, were still on the Supreme Court in 1857 when, in the Dred Scott decision, it prohibited Congress from barring slavery from the Western territories and proclaimed that blacks in the United States had ‘no rights which a white man is bound to respect.’”[19]

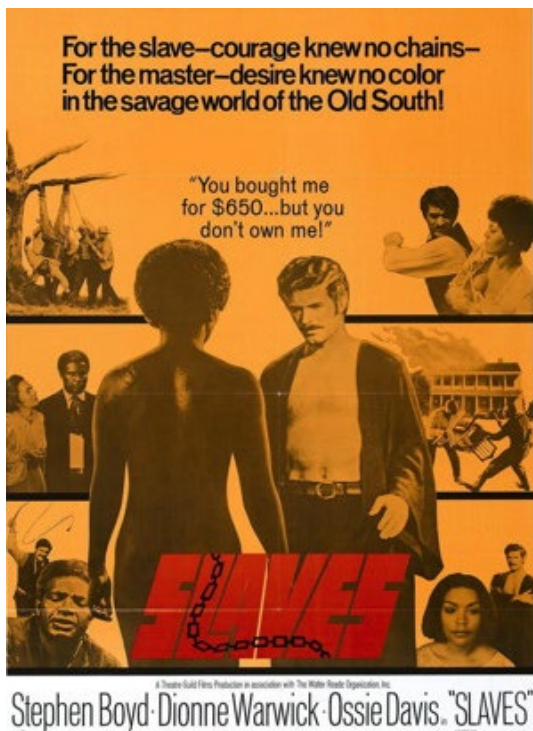
Not only does *Amistad* present an ideological whitewash and idealization of the U.S. judicial system, but Spielberg and his team have hardly any women in the film with active voice and participation. None of the major protagonists are shown engaged in conversation with women and the only women portrayed are abolitionists and black slave women who are positioned throughout as watching history unfold, mute objects passively observing the male subjects grapple with their society’s key issues, determining the fate of the nation and the *Amistad* rebels. Thus while it is highly salutary that Spielberg produced such a detailed and engaging historical epic about a key episode in U.S. history that had been largely forgotten, his achievement is limited by the ideological and representational limitations of Spielberg’s cinema.

Yet one can agree with the late Roger Ebert that:

“What is most valuable about ‘*Amistad*’ is the way it provides faces and names for its African characters, whom the movies so often make into faceless victims. The captive called Cinque emerges as a powerful individual, a once-free farmer who has lost his wife and family. We see his wife, and his village, and something of his life; we understand how cruelly he was ripped from his life and ambitions. (Since it was the policy of slavery to destroy African families, these scenes are especially poignant.)”[20]

Spielberg’s cinema, however, is highly individualistic and highlights and idealizes Great Men like Cinque, John Quincy Adams, and Roger Baldwin, who rises in the film from mediocre real estate lawyer who initially see the *Amistad* trial as a property issue, to one who grasps the moral and political dimension of the film and bonds as a brother with the noble Cinque.[21] While there appear representations of the abolitionist movement, the leading abolitionists are bit players to the Heroic Men who dominate the film, as is usual in Spielberg’s patriarchal male cinema.

Amistad ends with an ironic montage that presents the events that followed the trial and historical fates of the major players. Spielberg shows the British Royal Marines destroying the Lomboko Slave Fortress, and freeing Africans from its dungeons, with the British Captain Fitzgerald (Peter Firth) telegraphing U.S. Secretary of State Forsythe, who had denied the fortress’s existence, that indeed the Slave Fortress no longer exists. Graphic titles inform us that President Martin Van Buren lost his re-election campaign to William Henry Harrison, and that Queen Isabella II continued to demand the return of the slaves and the *Amistad*—until the fall of Atlanta during the U.S. Civil War when she gave it up. Heroic images and music reminiscent of Stalinist cinema show Cinquè and his fellow Africans returning on a ship to their home, dressed in white, the West African color of victory, accompanied by the translator James Covey. Yet a postscript says that Cinquè returned to find his country embroiled in civil war and his wife and child missing, likely sold into slavery.[22]



Herbert Biberman's *Slaves*



Gillo Pontecorvo's *Burn!*

Amistad received mixed reviews and was ultimately one of Spielberg's most unsuccessful movies at the box office, with a lifetime gross of only \$44,229,441.[23] Although nominated for Oscars in four categories, it received no Academy Awards. Historians criticized what they found to be negative representations of evangelical abolitionists, exaggeration of the historical significance of the Amistad revolt, and misrepresentation of some of the historical figures and details of the episode.[24] Spielberg, producer Debbie Allen, and scriptwriter David Franzoni claimed in various reviews that they "consciously chose to downplay the role of the white abolitionists and to concentrate on the Africans, particularly the charismatic Cinque,"[25] wishing to avoid the narrative where the Good White Man comes to save the blacks, although *Amistad* is not completely innocent of that charge as I note above.

In retrospect, the virtue of Spielberg's *Amistad* is rescuing a forgotten historical episode and bringing to public awareness the monstrosity of the institution of slavery, virtues that would be replicated in the rediscovery of Solomon Northup's *12 Years a Slave*. Spielberg deploys the resources of the classical Hollywood cinema to make his film, although moments are more modernist and the film is more didactic than most of his Hollywood entertainment extravaganzas. These aesthetic and political strategies would be replicated by Gordon Parks and Steve McQueen in their resurrections of a forgotten moment in U.S. history in cinematic renditions of Solomon Northup's narrative that I will engage in the next section.

Gordon Park's and Steve McQueen's constructions of Solomon Northup's *12 Years a Slave*

While it is admirable that Spielberg and his associates resurrected an almost forgotten incident of slave rebellion and called attention to the monstrosity of slavery in *Amistad*, the film did not really deal with the evils of slavery in the Americas. Blacklisted director Herbert Biberman, who had directed the highly acclaimed 1954 film portraying a New Mexican miner's strike *Salt of the Earth*, created *Slaves*, released in 1969, about a slave rebellion in Kentucky in the 1850s, but it got poor reviews and a truncated release. The same year Italian director Gillo Pontecorvo's *Burn!* starred Marlon Brando as a British agent fomenting a slave rebellion in the



Steve McQueen

Caribbean.[27]

Other memorable global cinematic slave narratives of the era which depict slavery in the Americas include Sergio Giral's *The Other Francisco* (Cuba: 1975), which brilliantly counterposes ideological takes on slavery in Cuba with its brutal everyday realities, and Tomas Gutierrez Alea's *The Last Supper* (Cuba: 1976), which deploys innovative modernist techniques to portray a slave rebellion in Cuba and its violent suppression.[28] No major film, however, portrayed the oppressive conditions of slavery on a U.S. plantation, and from the actual narrative of a slave who was kidnapped and spent twelve years on a southern plantation before gaining release until, first, Gordon Parks and then Steve McQueen provided cinematic versions of Solomon Northup's narrative *12 Years a Slave* which brutally revealed the horrific conditions of slavery in the United States in the 1840s. Given the current significance of McQueen's film, I'll start with an introduction to McQueen's work, will then turn to Gordon Park's 1984 PBS movie, and then will compare the two versions of Northup's narrative.

Steve McQueen was born on October 9, 1969 in London, England of British-Grenadian descent as Steve Rodney McQueen. First emerging in the public eye as an artist, McQueen attended Chelsea School of Art, London in 1989-1990, followed by study in Goldsmith's College, London, in 1990-1993, and the Tisch School of the Arts, New York University, New York, during 1993-1994. Known for video installations and short films, McQueen won the coveted Turner Prize in 1999 for his film-installation work and exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London, which I happened to attend, recalling powerful images of bodies, both in his installations and short films.[29]



Steve McQueen's *Hunger*

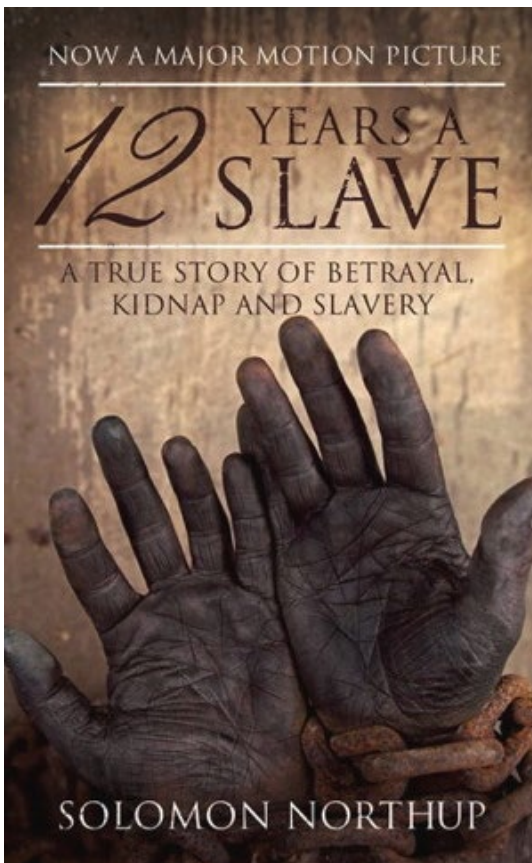
McQueen was awarded the O.B.E. (Officer of the Order of the British Empire) in the 2002 Queen's Birthday Honours List for his services to the Arts, and served as the Official War Artist for Iraq in association with the Imperial War Museum in 2003. In 2006, McQueen created a sheet of stamps of portraits commemorating the deaths of British soldiers in Iraq, and was appointed Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 2011 for his contribution to the visual arts. In 2013, at the time of the release of *12 Years a Slave*, McQueen was nominated as one of the six finalist for the prestigious Hugo Boss award.[30]

Steve McQueen became recognized as a major global movie director, first, through his highly acclaimed film *Hunger* (2008) that depicted a 1981 hunger strike by IRA militants, focusing on the slow death through hunger attrition of Bobby Sands, played by Michael Fassbinder, who would play key roles in McQueen's next two projects. *Hunger* was distinguished by long takes focusing on Sands' body, registering beatings, isolation, sores and wounds, and increasing emaciation during the hunger strike, until Sands' life literally departed his body by the end of the film. The beatings and emaciation scenes were intercut with sequences depicting the everyday life of a guard, with one resonant image showing a guard turning aside and crying during a brutal beating, and with scenes with Sands' parents, where at first he tried to convince them that all was "grand."

Hunger marked McQueen as a major cinematic talent, and his following film *Shame* (2011), depicting Michael Fassbinder as a man possessed by sexual obsession, also got excellent reviews and marked McQueen as a rising figure in world cinema. *Shame* focuses intensely on a New York corporate executive Brandon (played by Fassbinder), and the film centers on the character's face and body, often isolating him in long shots of a



Michael Fassbender and Steve McQueen:
cinematic collaborators



Solomon Northup's book, *12 Years a Slave*

barren urban environment, apparently denoting his alienation, interspersed by fragmentary and quickly edited images of his repeated sexual coupling, and relieved by expository sequences showing him interacting with fellow workers, women, and his troubled sister (Carey Mulligan), who comes to live with him. The focus on individual characters in long takes, and alternating close-ups of their faces with interactions with their environment, unfold in a modernist aesthetic space that finds beauty and resonant images in multiple locations and situations, punctuated by a highly fragmentary narrative, an aesthetic which characterizes McQueen's cinema. *12 Years a Slave* (2013), replicates this style, yet deploys a more classical narrative structure than his previous films by following the contours, if not always the letter, of Solomon Northup's tale.

McQueen's cinematic rendition of Solomon Northup's *12 Years a Slave* (2013) has indeed catapulted McQueen to the highest reaches of global cinema with the film winning major awards and critical acclaim for the director and cast.[31] Reflecting on the film's origins and gestation, McQueen has noted:[32]

"Three and a half years before finishing the production of *Twelve Years a Slave* I was lost."

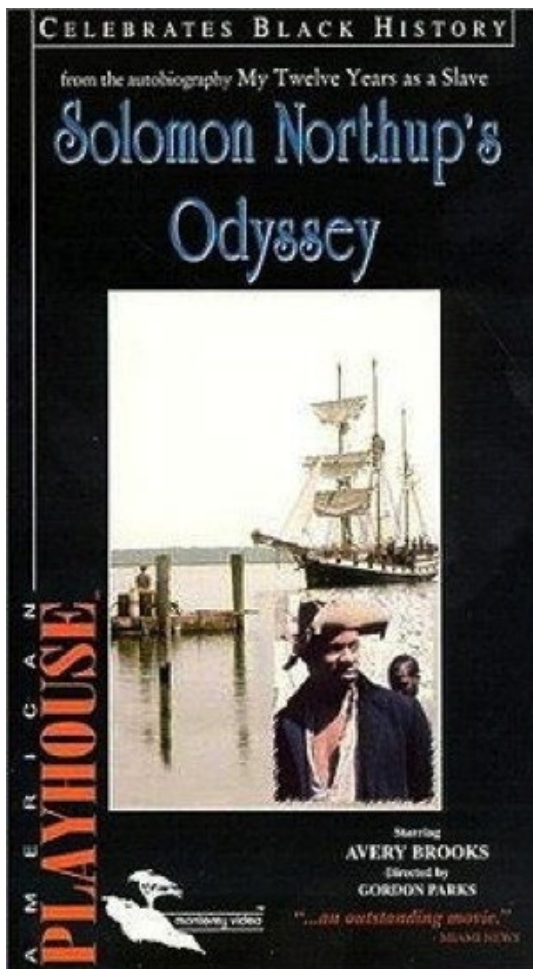
"I knew I wanted to tell a story about slavery, but where to start?"

"Finally, I had the idea of a free man kidnapped into bondage, but that's all I had. I was attracted to a story that had a main character any viewer could identify with, a free man who is captured and held against his will. For months I was trying to build a story around this beginning but not having great success until my partner Bianca Stigter, a historian, suggested that I take a look at true accounts of slavery. Within days of beginning our research, Bianca had unearthed *Twelve Years a Slave*, by Solomon Northup."

"'I think I've got it,' she said. If ever there was an understatement. The book blew both our minds: the epic range, the details, the adventure, the horror, and the humanity. It read like a film script, ready to be shot. I could not believe that I had never heard of this book. It felt as important as Anne Frank's diary, only published nearly a hundred years before."

"I was not alone in being unfamiliar with the book. Of all the people I spoke to not one person knew about *Twelve Years a Slave*. This was astonishing! An important tale told with so much heart and beauty needed to be more widely recognised. I hope my film can play a part in drawing attention to this important book of courage. Solomon's bravery and life deserve nothing less."

In an American Cinematique showing of *12 Years a Slave* with Steve McQueen present to do the Q&A that I attended at the Aero Cinema in Santa Monica on December 13, 2013, John Singleton introduced McQueen, claiming that this was the first time that anyone had really shown what slavery was all about. Singleton cited the white-washing of slavery in Hollywood films like *Birth of the Nation*, which Singleton claimed began



Gordon Parks' PBS film *Solomon Northup's Odyssey*

the trajectory of modern U.S. cinema, while also referring contemptuously to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as examples of Hollywood's inability to depict slavery in a realist fashion. During the Q&A, McQueen too claimed that Hollywood cinema had produced an idealized view of slavery in films like *Gone With the Wind*, *Showboat*, and other white-washed versions of slavery in the South, while he asserted that he wanted to present a *real* and *true* depiction of its horrors. McQueen marveled that he had never heard of Solomon Northup who had been disappeared from history. He also proclaimed the burning need to go back and cinematically explore the 400 year-old history of slavery in the Americas, and noted that while the four years of World War II had generated hundreds, perhaps thousands, of films, the long history and experience of slavery in the Americas had generated few films.[33]

Neither McQueen nor Singleton mentioned Gordon Parks' relatively unknown PBS "American Experience" movie of 1984 *Solomon Northup's Odyssey*, based on Northup's book *12 Years a Slave*,[34] nor did they mention Spielberg's *Amistad* or other efforts to represent slavery such as Herbert Biberman's *Slaves* (1969), Gilles Pontecorvo's *Burn!* (1969), Sergio Giral's *The Other Francisco* (1975), and Tomas Gutierrez Alea's *The Last Supper* (1976), all powerful depictions of slavery, which also portray forms of resistance. Yet McQueen has undeniably produced one of the most compelling indictments of slavery in contemporary cinema, and to highlight his achievement, I will contrast it to Gordon Parks' more modest 1984 *Solomon Northup's Odyssey*, comparing Parks' classical realist aesthetic with McQueen's more modernist modes of representation.

The legendary Gordon Parks began as a photographer and visual artist, turning to literature and then film to produce a well-received cinematic version of his novel of growing up black in Depression-era Kansas *The Learning Tree* (1969).[35] Born Gordon Roger Alexander Buchanan Parks on November 30, 1912 in Fort Scott Kansas, Parks died after an illustrious life on March 7, 2006 at the age of 93 in New York City. After hard-scrabble years during the Depression, Parks got a camera at the age of 25, won a photography fellowship with the Farm Security administration (FSA) for an exhibition of photos of a Chicago South Side black ghetto and trained with Roy Stryker on FSA projects. After the war, Parks became a freelance photographer for *Vogue*, and eventually became world famous for his work as a photographer and writer for *Life* magazine, producing stories and award-winning pictures of African American political leaders, everyday life, and the Civil Rights movement, in which he participated and became close to many of its leaders, including Malcolm X, who named Parks godfather of one of his children.

In one of his several autobiographies, *A Hungry Heart*, Parks recounts his early life and how he wrote and published *The Learning Tree* and then became the first major post-1960s African American director, as he directed the film of his autobiography and then went on to make *Shaft* (1971) and *Shaft's Big Score* (1972). The latter became landmarks in the emerging blaxploitation genre, which featured strong African American

males confronting a corrupt white power structure.[36] These genre films were followed by a biopic about the famous blues singer *Leadbelly* (1975), which Parks considered his best film.[37] Produced on a modest budget for public television, Parks then went on to direct *Solomon Northup's Odyssey* (1984), which deploys cinematic realism to provide a low-key but moving version of Northup's *12 Years a Slave*. In his memoir, *A Hungry Heart*, Parks recalls:

“I spent the next two weeks selecting my crew. It was a ticklish task. I had chosen to shoot the film in the Deep South, especially in the areas where Solomon had spent his gruesome time. I wanted a mixed crew, perhaps to show Southerners how Whites and Blacks could work peacefully together. Hiro Narita, a Japanese-American with great talent, was picked to be my cinematographer. The producer and the assistant director were Black. A good part of the technical crew was White ... When we arrived in Savannah, Georgia, the Whites there goggled at the strange mix of people. For a few days they watched with furious eyes. Eventually they saw what was happening. Ink, amber, and honey were flowing together peacefully. It had never occurred to some of the Whites that these different races could enjoy eating beside one another.”[38]

Both Parks and McQueen follow fairly closely Northup's narrative of how he was kidnapped in Washington, D.C. in 1841 and sold into slavery, working on plantations in Louisiana for 12 years before his release, although they present distinct cinematic renditions of the text. McQueen repeatedly stated at the Aero that he wished to find cinematic means of telling the story through an eyebrow, a tear, objects, a sequence of images, and juxtaposition between the beauties of nature and horrors of slavery. Shot by his recurrent cameraman Sean Bobbitt, McQueen's version of *12 Years a Slave* was written by John Ridley, and premiered at the Telluride



Solomon Northup free and happy with his family in the opening of *12 Years*

Film Festival on August 30, 2013. The film was given a limited release in the United States on October 18, 2013, with a nationwide release on November 1, 2013. McQueen told the Aero crowd that he shot the film in 35 days with one camera, but had long thought of the story and worked with Ripley on the script, bringing in Hans Zimmer to do the music once the shooting and editing was finished with the first cut.

Signaling his modernist aesthetic, McQueen's *12 Years* opens with a montage of resonant images of slave life, including work cutting sugar cane in a plantation field, followed by the transmutation of a bowl of ripe berries into ink with which Northup will write his narrative, images that will be reprised in the unfolding of the film. McQueen's cinema has been marked by the search for resonant images that capture the heart of a situation, alternating long takes with relatively quick cuts in a modernist aesthetic that breaks the rules of narrative continuity and conventional cinematography.

After an opening montage, McQueen cuts to an idyll of Solomon Northup (played by Chiwetel Ejiofor),[40] as a free black man living in New York State, who, accompanied by his well-dressed wife and children, enter a shop where he is respectfully recognized by the shop owner, while a slave named Jasper appears dumbstruck at the sight of a free African American family, signifying Northup's comfort in his situation and status as a free man. The film cuts quickly to a scene of Northup bidding his wife and children farewell, as she leaves to take a temporary position as a cook. Soon after, Solomon meets two men who praise his talent as a fiddler and offer him money to join them with a temporary job in the circus, for which they tell him that he will be well paid. Soon after, Northup finds himself in chains in a prison in Washington and rages in despair.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Northup's wife in Gordon Park's *Solomon Northup's Odyssey*

Hence, while Solomon Northup opens his 1853 narrative with a detailed genealogy of the history of his family and how he became a free black man and then married, had a family, and moved from a farm where the family had worked for some years to the town where he hoped to advance himself as a carpenter and fiddler, McQueen chooses fragmentary resonant images organized in a modernist collage to depict Northup's fall from freedom into the bondage of slavery.

Gordon Parks, by contrast, in *Solomon Northup's Odyssey*, opens with a moon shining in a dark night and cuts to an interior with couples happily dancing to Northup's exuberant fiddling. Departing from the narrative of the book, Parks unfolds in realist detail a home scene where Northup argues with his wife about money, first forbidding her to go accept a job as a cook that would force her temporarily to leave the house, and then attempting to justify their move from farm to city and his inability to gain steady work as a carpenter, a conflict not presented in Northup's book, which has but a few idealized remembrances of his wife and family. Parks, by contrast, uses many flashbacks to Northup's happy life with his family and to his wife making efforts to find him and procure his freedom. The need for family income motivates Northup in Parks' story into accepting the two strangers' offer to leave his New York home and travel to Washington D.C. on a promise of employment as a violinist with a show. Hence, Parks deploys a more conventional narrative form to tell Northup's story, providing motivation for his actions, depicting in a conventional realist narrative Solomon's relation to his wife and his previous life, and deploys more conventional narrative pacing and continuity than the Avant-Garde modernist McQueen.

Both Parks and McQueen depict Northup waking up in a prison in Washington, D.C., with Northup protesting his bondage and then being beaten into submission, a thrashing especially dramatized in McQueen's powerful rendition. In a long take with darkness and shadows, McQueen renders the sound of Northup being beaten with a wooden paddle after waking up in chains. Cinematographer Sean Bobbit noted in an interview:

"We're seeing Solomon's reaction, but he's hidden in the shadow. That allows us to project our feelings onto him. The audience has to search the frame a bit. Once you get them engaged like that, I think that heightens their emotional involvement."^[41] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]



Solomon Northup in Park's *Odyssey*

Indeed, throughout the film, McQueen deploys modernist strategies of excess to demonstrate the horrors of pummeling slaves into submission, with repeated images of whips loudly lashing black bodies, close-ups of bloodied scars, and beaten and humiliated humans, and the sounds of whips lacerating the flesh and of the humans subjected to such brutal violence. Further, McQueen constructs an unsettling sound montage with Hans Zimmer's music interlaced by unnatural natural sounds of insects, birds, and ambient nature pierced by bodies being brutalized and individuals screaming in pain.

Parks, by contrast, frames Northup's sudden enslavement more ironically, cutting from a close-up of the ivory white building of Congress, just minutes from the slave-pit where Northup finds himself imprisoned. This follows Northup's text where he describes how

"we passed, handcuffed and in silence, through the streets of Washington through the Capital of a nation, whose theory of government, we are told, rests on the foundation of man's inalienable right to life, LIBERTY, and the pursuit of happiness! Hail! Columbia, happy land, indeed!" (1853: 13).

The noxious trader Theophilus Freeman, played by Paul Giamatti in McQueen's film, beats Northup repeatedly when he refuses to utter his slave name and accept his status, declaring: "My sentimentality extends the length of a coin"—capturing the nexus of greed and pathological viciousness at the bottom of the slave trade. Indeed, the ironically named Theophilus Freeman, described as "very amiable, pious-hearted" by Northup (1853: 28), is played as quite repellent by Giamatti encouraging potential customers to check the auctioned slaves' teeth, body, and reactions to detect the value of the merchandise, and thus serving as a vile capitalist merchant of human beings.

In both films, Solomon Northup learns of the extremity of his changed condition as he is taken from a slave pen to go to the auction, learning that his new name is "Platt." Solomon is forced to accept the name for much of the rest of the story, dramatizing how slavery stole name and identity from their rightful owners. Another trope of the utter inhumanity of slavery occurs at the auction block in both films when the children of a slave woman Eliza are torn from her and sold to other owners, a story found in Northup's narrative which McQueen intensely dramatizes, showing Eliza writhing and screaming in utter despair (1853: 31f).

Parks' *Odyssey* depicts in some detail the slow workings of justice through which Northup is eventually released, while McQueen takes him from one horror to another until in the depths of degradation and despair suddenly lawmen show up to tell Northup that he is free. Relatively early in the movie when Northup discovers himself in captivity, Parks presents a long narrative scene with Northup insisting to the slave pen overseer that he was a free man, while the white man declared that he was a slave and the property of his new owner, whipping him repeatedly when he claims he was a free man and not a slave who was the property of someone else. The contrast between Northup as a free man and a slave who is the property of others informs Parks' narrative as a leitmotif, frequently returned to and articulated.

McQueen, by contrast, tends to use images and not dialogue to delineate his themes, deploying resonant images and montage to depict Northup's sudden descent into a slave pen and shipment south to New Orleans, where he is sold at a slave market and taken into bondage and the horrors of plantation life in Louisiana. McQueen's narrative deploys fragmentary montage of scenes for the first thirty-three minutes, depicting Northup's fall from freedom to slavery as a hallucinatory nightmare of horrors, while the subsequent scenes of Northup's bondage as a slave on the Ford and Epps plantations follow the more conventional narrative continuity story-



Paul Dano as a sadistic overseer in *12 Years*



Close to lynching in *12 Years*



Michael Fassbender as Epps in McQueen's *12 Years*

telling of Northup's memoir.

McQueen filmed much of the location in a region where slaves once lived and worked the land and exploits the landscape, decaying Southern mansions, and sounds of the region to use the aesthetics of the site as a backdrop to the unspeakable brutality and monstrosity which his film will attempt to capture. Both Parks and McQueen follow Northup's narrative of contrasting relatively humane with exceptionally monstrous slave owners. Following Northup's text, Solomon, now Platt, finds himself on the plantation of a well-meaning but ineffectual owner William Ford, whom Northup says later becomes a Baptist minister.[42] Played by Mason Adams in Parks' rendition, Ford quickly recognizes Platt/Northup's abilities, especially, when he supervises building a raft to ship lumber down a river, a scene replicated by McQueen's Ford, played by Benedict Cumberbatch.

Northup mentions the cruelty of a carpenter John M. Tibeats employed by Ford (p. 39), and one of the most disturbing scenes in both films involves an episode where Platt/Solomon becomes involved in an altercation with the sadistic overseer Tibeat.[43] McQueen uses actor Paul Dano to play Tibeats over-the-top, excessively tormenting Platt, and in one scene McQueen has Dano singing a racist song "Run Nigger Run" as he lords himself over the slaves. McQueen presents Tibeats as a crazed white tormentor of blacks, revealing McQueen's propensity for modernist shock and exaggeration techniques that go beyond Solomon Northup's text, or Parks' more traditional realist mode of representation.

In one telling episode, after being accused by Tibeats of not properly hammering nails on a house construction, while Platt/Northup insisted he was properly attaching the nails, Northup finally explodes with anger after Tibeats attempts to lash him and takes up the whip and fiercely beats his tormentor, a scene that McQueen draws out at length. After his outburst, Platt/Northup is seized and hung up on a tree and left dangling close to death overnight, a scene which McQueen aestheticizes with resonant images of Platt/Northup dangling from the tree, his feet barely able to touch the ground in order to keep him from hanging to death. The iconography of lynching and images of blacks hanging from trees is, of course, a powerful and disturbing one that McQueen exploits to deeply instill the inhumanity and horrors of slavery on the audience.

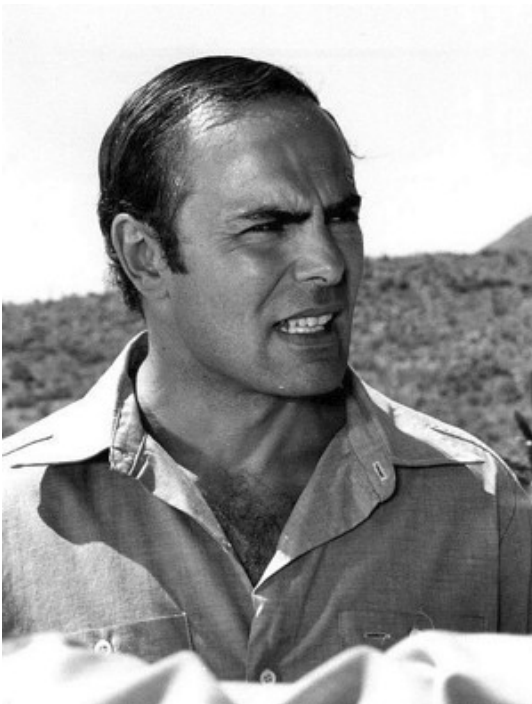
For both Parks and McQueen, Ford is shown as ineffectual and forced to sell his slaves to Edwin Epps, a much harsher owner who represents the cruel inhumanity and brutality of slavery for Northup. Parks' Epps (John Saxon) is shown as harsh and uneducated and held in contempt by his higher-class wife, and while brutal, he is not the absolute monster played by Michael Fassbinder. At the Aero Q+A, McQueen insisted that he wanted to portray Epps as a human, but in my repeated viewings of *Solomon Northup's Odyssey* and *Twelve Years*, Parks' depiction of Epps presented a more multifaceted human being, precisely in his limitations and foibles, while McQueen/Fassbinder's Epps is demonic in his viciousness. McQueen



Patsey as noble suffering slave woman



Solomon and Jenny in Gordon Park's *Odyssey*



Epps in Park's *Odyssey*

has a character narratively describe Epps to Platt/Northup as a "nigger breaker," and his Epps reacts with sadism, psychotic violence, and demonic evil beyond the human.[44]

The excess in Fassbinder's Epps, in contrast to the restraint in which the malevolent Epps is portrayed in Parks' film, comes out clearly during a night scene in which Epps is shown genuinely enjoying dancing with the black slaves as Solomon plays the fiddle, while Epps in the McQueen version dances maniacally, like a man possessed. McQueen shows Epps sexually obsessed by a comely slave Patsey (Lupita Nyong'o), who is portrayed by McQueen as the best worker, outpicking the male slaves repeatedly in the cotton field.[45] The theme of sexual obsession was the topic of McQueen's previous film *Shame* (2012), and it is played out to the extreme with Fassbinder's Epps portrayed as a vicious man in the throes of sexual passion and violence.

Patsey also attracts the hatred of Epps' wife (Sarah Paulson), who McQueen initially plays as sympathetic, but who becomes increasingly monstrous herself as the plot evolves and her jealousy explodes, driving her to demand that Patsey be whipped to death, in a violent scene that is almost unbearable in its intensity. Interestingly, Parks' representation of Epps' wife is much softer and for the disruptive character Patsey, Parks substitutes a gentler character Jenny (Rhetta Greene), who is shown turning to Platt/Northup for affection and love when they find themselves newly enslaved on the plantation, but who turns to Epps out of convenience and a desire to elevate herself.

In Parks' rendition, Platt is ordered by Epps to whip Jenny to placate Epps' wife, and Platt takes her into a barn where he pretends to beat her, while in McQueen's version Platt is forced to whip Patsey repeatedly in an almost unbearable scene. The long takes which show Patsey's brutal beating, as well as other long takes that feature whippings, beatings, and rape, point to a pornography of violence evident throughout McQueen's major films.[46] As noted, *Hunger* features long takes of Bobby Sands being brutally beaten, focusing on the effects and aftermath of his torture. The hunger strike scenes of Sands feature interminably long takes of his emaciated body, sores, and sunken hollow eyes. Strangely, the sex scenes and nude bodies of *Shame*, also fetishistically shot in long takes, are not really pornographic in the sense of evoking arousal, while the images of violence in *Hunger* and *12 Years* are pornographic in their explicitness, overtness, and extreme violence.

Yet the quasi-pornographic violence is interspersed in McQueen's *12 Years*, with moments of aestheticism bursting out in extended lyrical shots of plantation beauty and Louisiana landscape, and a rich sound montage of natural sounds of a teeming southern Nature, interspersed with Hans Zimmer's haunting score. In scene that depicts the incongruities of slavery, Solomon goes to a neighboring plantation to fetch Patsey, who is having tea with an African American plantation Mistress Shaw (Alfre Woodard).

Mistress Shaw has gained freedom of a sort by marrying a wealthy white plantation owner, highlighting the bizarreness of plantation life in an almost surreal tableau.[47]

To the criticism that his *12 Years* aestheticizes violence, McQueen has answered in reviews:

“Think of Goya. He painted the most horrendous acts of violence of his era, in the most beautiful way. The beauty was a way of saying, ‘Look at this, I want your attention.’”[48]

Like Spielberg in *Amistad*, McQueen uses Goya-esque contrasts of darkness and light, captivity and freedom, and powerful images of suffering and degradation, deploying aesthetics to convey messages about domination and liberation, good and evil.

One might contrast the motifs of religion in Northup, Parks, and McQueen’s telling of *12 Years*. In his memoir, Northup has conventional remarks toward God and religion, while both Parks and McQueen illustrate how slave-owners use the Bible to legitimate slavery and to attempt to get slaves to submit to their inhumane living and working conditions. While Ford is presented in all the three texts as a relatively humane slave-owner, his use of scriptures to attempt to help his slaves come to accept their condition is presented by McQueen as hypocritical and mendacious, and there are few if any hints of religious redemption in McQueen’s bleak cinemascap.

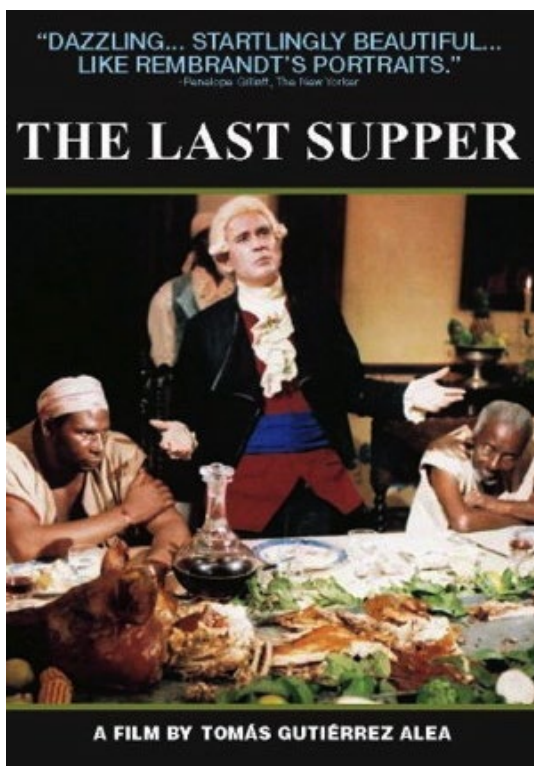


Brad Pitt as the anti-slavery worker Bass in *12 Years*

McQueen’s *12 Years* portrays Platt/Northup driven to the depths of despair, finally thinking that it was impossible for him to escape, while Parks’ narrative, by contrast, pictures Northup’s wife continually making efforts to rescue him and the narrative movement depicts in detail the steps taken to finally rescue Northup. Parks’ film, for instance, shows a letter sent relatively early in the film reaching his wife and encouraging her to keep up the search for her missing husband. Later, in both Parks’ and McQueen’s narrative, a sympathetic carpenter Sam Bass is taken into Northup’s confidence and he tells him who he really is and implores him to send a letter telling his wife where he is currently enslaved. In McQueen’s version, Bass (played by a very sympathetic Brad Pitt who also served as one of the film’s producers) is the one white person in the film who connects to Northup on a personal level and promises to deliver his letter and take up his case. He responds sympathetically to Northup’s plight and tells him: “Your story is amazing, and in no way good.” Moreover, Bass is the one character allowed by McQueen to articulate a critique of slavery, telling Epps that “If you don’t treat them as humans, then you will have to answer for it,” an argument Epps is incapable of understanding.[49]

In McQueen’s version, Bass leaves the plantation to seek work and adventures elsewhere, and Northup falls into deep despair, believing that Bass too has failed to come to his aide. A burning letter denotes the depths of Northup’s despair and hopelessness, just before authorities arrive at the plantation to tell Northup he is free and to take him back north, while Epps and his wife look on in amazement and anger at seeing their idyll of ownership undermined.

Parks and McQueen both end their versions of *12 Years* with Northup being happily reunited with his wife and children, and both end with graphic titles noting that Northup attempted to bring criminal charges against the kidnappers. The graphics in both films indicate that Northup,



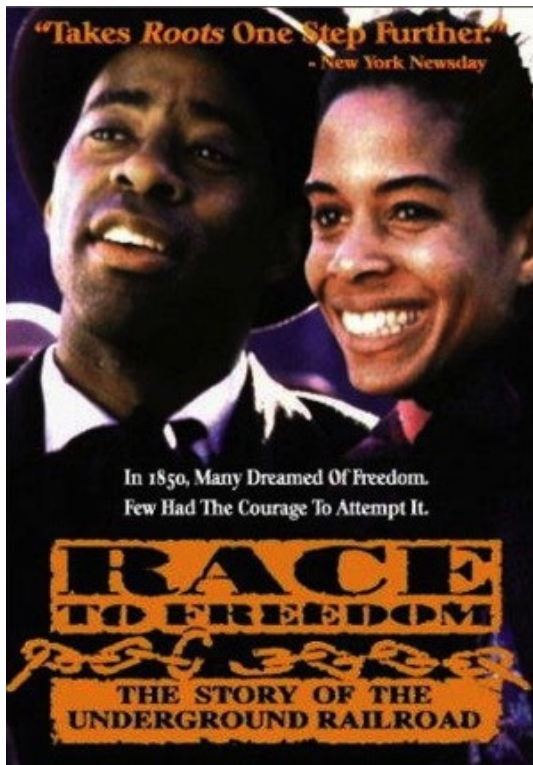
Tomas Gutierrez Alea's *The Last Supper* (1976) depicts collective slave revolt.

as a black man, could not testify in court, pointing to the continued ills of slavery, segregation, and racism after Northup's liberation, a condition that would lead to the Civil War and decades of still ongoing and intense civil rights struggles.

Yet for a film that deals with such a politically explosive topic like slavery, McQueen's *12 Years* is curiously conventional in its explicit liberal ideology which focuses on the individual male hero and his fate. Although McQueen breaks with many conventional Hollywood narrative and aesthetic codes, like Spielberg, he follows the individualism of the classical Hollywood cinema with intense focus on the narrative of Solomon Northup and reverential close-ups of actor Chiwetel Ejiofor with a centering of the central character in almost every scene. This epic of individual survival also features the typical Hollywood happy ending, signaled in advance by those who know that the title "*12 Years a Slave*" signifies a period of captivity that Northup survives and is liberated from.

In McQueen's film, Northup embodies a largely conservative individualism concerned above all with his liberty and family. When aboard a slave ship en route to the slave market in New Orleans, a fellow black tells Solomon that if he wants to survive: "Tell no one who you are. Tell no one you can read and write." Responding, Northup insists: "I don't want to survive. I want to live." Yet once he discovers the nature of his condition, Northup is basically a survivor who throughout the film often acts in an aristocratic manner with cultured dictation and superior skills in many arenas, positioning himself as a highly superior individual human being. At the end of the narrative, once he is told that he is now free, in McQueen's version Northup absorbs the dejected looks of the other slaves, who will continue in their miserable condition, wordlessly hugs Patsey, and leaves alone to freedom and a happy reunion with his family.

In Parks' film version, Northup turns and tells an old slave that "I won't forget you," and indeed Northup does write his stunning narrative account of his captivity that described in detail the inhuman system of oppression that inspired abolitionists and would be challenged in the Civil War. McQueen, however, renders the dynamics of his liberation as a surprising stroke of good luck, unlike Parks' *Solomon Northup's Odyssey* which signals the eventual freeing of Northup and the process through which his



Race to Freedom: The Underground Railroad

wife and white patron's search for him are successful. Hence, despite the rigorous modernist aesthetics and brutal depiction of the horrors of slavery, McQueen's *12 Years* provides a rather conventional story of survival and endurance, followed by a Happy Ending, a genre very popular in contemporary Hollywood cinema, embodied in 2013 films like *Gravity*, *All Is Lost*, and *Captain Phillips*.

The most radical political films depicting slavery in the Americas like Gilles Pontecorvo's *Burn!* (1969), or Tomas Gutierrez Alea's *The Last Supper* (1976), feature slave rebellion and portray collective revolt, although they may have a leader like Cinque in *Amistad*, or José Dolores in *Burn!*. A 1994 Canadian film *Race to Freedom: The Underground Railroad*, directed by Don McBrearty, also features collective struggle, showing white abolitionists and slaves working together to smuggle slaves out of the South and into freedom, despite great dangers.

12 Years, by contrast, is a narrative of survival and endurance where with one narrative exception, Solomon Northup/Platt accommodates himself to the system in order to survive. McQueen deploys Hollywood frames of individualism to depict one heroic survivor of slavery, whereas the film mentioned above depict collective struggle and focus on an array of characters, all involved in the great abolitionist movement to eliminate slavery that prepared the way for the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation. Yet in a deeper existential/political register, McQueen's film, like the works of Kafka and Beckett in Adorno's analyses,[50] expresses the horror and monstrosity of slavery in ways that capture its pathology and obscenity and provide no redemptive moments except for Northup's survival. McQueen's modernist aesthetic produces images that burn into the deepest layers of the spectators' mind and provide an experience of a horrific history that has profoundly shaped U.S. culture and society to this day.

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes

1. There is a scholarly edition of Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, co-edited by Sue Eakin and Joseph Logsdon, Library of Southern Civilization: Louisiana State University Press, 1968. The book was expanded and re-issued in August 2013 as *Solomon Northup: The Complete Story of the Author of Twelve Years a Slave*, edited by Clifford W. Brown, and Rachel Seligman (New York Praeger, 2013). I bought a reproduction of the original publication from Amazon brought out to coincide with the release of McQueen's film with the *original* publication material in the frontpiece, from which I'll cite pages. The subtitle of the original carries the eyebrow-raising *Narrative of Solomon Northup, citizen of New-York, kidnapped in Washington city in 1841, and rescued in 1853, from a cotton plantation near the Red River, in Louisiana*; I also draw from an online version of the original printed text at https://archive.org/stream/twelveyearsslaveoonortuoft/twelveyearsslaveoonortuoft_djvu.txt (accessed December 15, 2013). DVD versions of Gordon Park's *Solomon Northup's Odyssey* and Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* are available at Amazon.com. [[return to page 1](#)]
2. Note omitted.
3. For a list of *12 Years a Slave's* Academy Award for best picture, and multiple other awards in 2013, see <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2024544/awards> (accessed on August 26, 2014).
4. The conception of classical Hollywood narrative cinema that I will use is articulated in David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press; Reprint edition 1985). On modernism, I am using the concept delineated by Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas Kellner in our Introduction to *Passion and Rebellion: The Expressionist Heritage*, co-edited by Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas Kellner (New York: Universe Books and Bergin Publishers (USA) and London: Croom Helm (England), 1983; second edition, Columbia University Press, 1988). Introduction online at http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/Bronner_Kellner.pdf (accessed on December 20, 2013). See also Stephen Eric Bronner's collection of articles, *Modernism at the Barricades: Aesthetics, Politics, Utopia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).
5. For a clear narrative of the Amistad story, see Walter Dean Myers, *Amistad: A Long Road to Freedom* (New York: Dutton's Children Books,

1998). Myers, a five-time recipient of the Coretta Scott King Award and winner of awards for “Outstanding literature for Young Adults,” provides a clear, compelling, and engagingly illustrated account of the Amistad struggle and its place within the U.S. Civil Rights and liberation African American struggles.

6. Marcus Rediker, *The Amistad Rebellion. An Atlantic Odyssey of Slavery and Freedom* (New York: Viking, 2012: 3ff. Rediker, author of the renown book *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (Baltimore: Penguin reprints 2008), wishes to tell the story of the Amistad rebellion from below (p. 12). He skillfully brings to life and personalities and experiences of the rebellious slaves and to situate their story within the context of the global revolts going on at the time against slavery, of which the Amistad rebellion is an important part. Rediker also provides a well-researched and compelling portrait of the abolitionist movement and the specific American white and black individuals who helped the Amistad rebels in their struggle for freedom and to return to their homeland in Africa.

7. On the DVD of *Amistad*, both Spielberg and producer Debbie Allen tell how Allen brought the story idea to Spielberg. On the TCM movie site, David Sterritt notes:

“The idea of filming the Amistad affair came from actress and director Debbie Allen, who had run across some books on the subject. After running into fund-raising problems, she brought the project to Spielberg, who wanted to stretch his artistic wings after making *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* (1997), and was looking for a prestige production to direct for DreamWorks SKG, the studio he'd recently co-founded. Spielberg was an unlikely person to tackle the Amistad story, since his previous picture about black characters, *The Color Purple*, had been badly received by the black community, its eleven Oscar nominations (no wins) notwithstanding. ‘I got such a bollocking for *The Color Purple*,’ he told a *New York Times* interviewer, ‘I thought, I’ll never do that again.’ But Spielberg evidently saw great potential in the Amistad story, and decided to take it on, even though his crowded schedule meant doing pre-production while DreamWorks was still being launched and post-production while *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) was before the camera.”

David Sterritt, “Amistad,” *Turner Classic Movies* at <http://www.tcm.com/this-month/article/188770%7Co/Amistad.html> (accessed October 31, 2013). Allen had also acted in *Roots*; see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Debbie_Allen (accessed October 31, 2013).

8. On the production background of *Amistad*, see Lester D. Friedman, *Citizen Spielberg*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), pp. 269ff.

9. Rediker writes that “Cinque found a loose nail on deck and used it to pick the central padlock. Whether the locks were broken or picked, it was significant that two of the forty-nine enslaved men were blacksmiths, who

knew the properties of iron intimately from their work” (op. cit., p. 75).

10. On the influence of Goya on the look of parts of *Amistad*, see the “Making of” feature and the DVD, and Frank Sanello, *Spielberg: The Man, the Movies, the Mythology*. Taylor Trade Publications, 2002, p. 272 at Google Publication <http://books.google.com/books?id=A6hmQbfOeTAC&pg=PA271&lpg=PA271&dq=Spielberg+Janusz+Kaminski+Francisco+Goya.&source=bl&ots=afg3dtl14f&sig=vuQK35-pBkScZYQaO1ur1ToV9rQ&hl=en&sa=X&ei=cx51UrSgL6TAigKo2Y-CABw&ved=0CC4Q6AEwAQ-v=onepage&q=Spielberg+Janusz+Ka> (accessed October 2, 2013).

11. In *Slaves on Screen. Film and Historical Vision* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000), Natalie Zemon Davis describes how Spielberg and his production team employed and consulted historians to try to accurately portray the events depicted, and provides as well historical background on historical misrepresentations of characters and events, as well as criticisms by historians of the film. See Davis, pp. 72ff. on how Debbie Allen brought the story to Spielberg and how they made use of historical advisors to the project.

12. Rediker indicates that Cinque and others of the slaves labored to learn English while incarcerated, and that abolitionists used former African slaves, who had become freed and had been working on ships as translators. In an amusing scene in Spielberg’s film in which the African slaves are being introduced to the abolitionist lawyers who will defend them, a University linguist who supposedly specializes in African languages is utterly unable to translate the Mende dialect of the rebels, and in comic scenes mistranslates completely what the Africans are saying. Soon, however, they will have their own translator, based on a historical figure James Convey played by Chiwetel Ejiofor (see Rediker, op. cit., pp. 11ff, passim) who stars in Steve McQueen’s *12 Years a Slave* which I discuss below.

13. Spielberg’s Joadson character was a composite of several abolitionists, while Tappan was a major historical figure in the movement; Davis regrets that Tappan was not assigned a larger role in Spielberg’s narrative (op. cit. p. 79), while many critics wish that the Joadson character and excellent actor Morgan Freeman could have had a more expanded role in the film.

14. Rediker delineates the complex welter of legal issues that were adjudicated in various trials (op. cit., p. 131f.) At the initial pre-trial hearing in the U.S. District Court, charges of piracy and murder were dropped “whereupon the claims of property became the key issue” (p. 132)—as it would in Spielberg’s film. For a useful delineation of the subsequent trials, leading up to the concluding Supreme Court decision, see Myers, op. cit., pp. 51-74.

15. According to Myers, op. cit., Cinque did call out in English “Give us free!” p. 65. As Davis points out in her study of *Spartacus*, Stanley Kubrick’s 1960 film about a Roman slave rebellion also uses the discourse of freedom as a counterpart to slavery as an organizing theme of the film; see *Slaves on Screen* op. cit., pp. 17ff.

16. On the importance of the theme of "home" which runs through Spielberg's films, see the book and article by Antonio Sánchez-Escalonilla, *Steven Spielberg: Entre Ulises y Peter Pan*. Madrid: CIE Dossat, 2005, and "El primer regreso al hogar en el cine de Steven Spielberg," *Film Historia* 19.1 (2009).

17. See Douglas Kellner, "Lincoln in contemporary U.S. culture and politics," *Jump Cut*, No. 55 (Fall 2013) at <http://www.ejumpcut.org/trialsite/KellnerLincoln/> (accessed November 5, 2013). [[return to page 2](#)]

19. Eric Foner, "The Amistad Case in Fact and Film," *History Matters* (March 1998) at <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/74/> (accessed November 5, 2013).

20. Roger Ebert, AMISTAD, December 12, 1997 at <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/amistad-> (accessed November 5, 2013).

21. Davis claims that the historical Baldwin had worked for abolitionist causes and was from the beginning strongly committed to the moral and political dimensions of the case; op. cit., pp. 79-80.

22. For Rediker's description of subsequent fate of the Amistad case participants, see op. cit, pp. 224ff.

23. See <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/search/?q=Amistad> (accessed December 21, 2013). Most of Spielberg's films gross hundreds of millions.

24. For a detailed analysis of the film's reception and criticism by historians, see Friedman, *Citizen Spielberg*, op. cit., pp. 269-282, and Davis, *Slaves on Screen*, op. cit, pp. 81ff.

25. Friedman, *Citizen Spielberg*, op. cit., p. 271.

26. As I edit the text in late August 2014, *Slaves* is available on Amazon Instant Video, but I could not find a DVD release, nor was there much critical discussion about the film on-line. I recall seeing *Slaves* in Paris in the 1970s where it had a cult status in some circles.

27. On *Burn!* see Carlo Celli, *Gillo Pontecorvo: From Resistance to Terrorism*. Lanham MD: Scarecrow Press, 2005. Marlon Brando claims: "I did some of my best acting in *Burn!*" See *Brando: Songs My Mother Taught Me*. New York: Random House, 1994, p. 364. See also Michael T. Martin and David C. Wall, "The Politics of Cine-Memory: Signifying Slavery in the History Film," in Robert A. Rosenstone and Constantin Parvulesu, eds. *A Companion to the Historical Film* (New York and London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013, pp. 445-467).

28. Tomas Gutierrez Alea's *The Last Supper* is analyzed in Davis, op. cit., and John D.H. Downing, "Four Films of Tomas Gutierrez Alea," in *Film and Politics in the Third World*, edited by John D.H. Downing (Brooklyn, New York: Autonomedia, 1987), pp. 279-302. Downing's excellent anthology also contains an interview with *The Other Francisco* director Sergio Giral who

discusses his films and asserts that the period of intense slavery in Cuba prior to 1868 remains a blind-spot in Cuban history; see Sergio Giral, "Cuban Cinema and the Afro-Cuban Heritage," op. cit., pp. 267-278. See also essay by Julia Lesage, *Jump Cut* 30 (1985), <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC30folder/OtherFrancisco.html>

29. McQueen's art work and short films are described in the Wikipedia entry at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steve_McQueen_\(director\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steve_McQueen_(director)) (accessed December 16, 2013).

30. Carol Vogel, "Steve McQueen Among 6 Hugo Boss Prize Finalists," New York Times, December 12, 2013 at http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/13/arts/design/steve-mcqueen-among-6-hugo-boss-prize-finalists.html?_r=0 (accessed December 20, 2013).

31. After its showing at the Toronto Film Festival, critics were claiming that *12 Years* had a lock on the Oscars and other major awards. See Catherine Shoard, "Toronto: *12 Years a Slave* premieres to ecstatic reactions and Oscar lockdown. Steve McQueen's account of a free man sold into slavery wins awards buzz, a standing ovation, and praise for its director from producer/star Brad Pitt." *The Observer*, September 6, 2013 23.04 at <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/sep/07/12-years-a-slave-toronto-premiere> (accessed September 16, 2013). For a compilation of early praise for *12 Years*, see Anna Silman, "Review Roundup: The Most Effusive Praise of *12 Years a Slave*," *Vulture*, October 18, 2013 at <http://www.vulture.com/2013/10/most-effusive-praise-of-12-years-a-slave.html> (accessed December 17, 2013).

32. Extracted from the new edition of *Twelve Years a Slave by Solomon Northup*, published by Penguin Classics (London, 2013), and cited from Steve McQueen,

"*Twelve Years a Slave*: the astonishing book that inspired my film. In trying to create a film about slavery I barely knew where to start—until my partner, historian Bianca Stigter, uncovered a true account of slavery that blew our minds."

The Guardian, December 2, 2013 at <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/shortcuts/2013/dec/02/twelve-years-a-slave-book-inspired-film-solomon-northup> (accessed December 20, 2013).

33. McQueen tells a similar story in an interview with Dan P. Lee, "Where It Hurts: Steve McQueen on Why *12 Years a Slave* Isn't Just About Slavery," *Vulture*, December 8, 2013 at <http://www.vulture.com/2013/12/steve-mcqueen-talks-12-years-a-slave.html> (accessed December 20, 2013).

34. The only comparison of McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* to Park's *Solomon Northup's Odyssey* that I have so far found is Bilge Ebiri, "A Tale Twice Told: Comparing *12 Years a Slave* to 1984's TV Movie *Solomon Northup's*

Odyssey,” *Vulture*, November 11, 2013 at <http://www.vulture.com/2013/11/12-years-a-slave-vs-gordon-parks-1984-solomon-northups-odyssey.html> (accessed December 15, 2013).

35. On Parks’ life and work, see Gordon Parks, *A Hungry Heart {A Memoir}* (New York: Atria Books, 2005) and *The Learning Tree* (New York: Fawcett 1987).

36. On the blaxploitation genre, see Douglas Kellner and Michael Ryan, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film*. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1988 and Mikel J. Koven, *Blaxploitation Films*. London, UK: Oldcastle Books, 2010.

37. Parks writes:

“Although the box office did not agree, I will always feel that *Leadbelly* was my strongest and most ambitious film. It was the story of a real-life musician called the King of the Twelve String Guitar. Huddie Ledbetter’s sorrowful plight gave an honest look at the bigotry that was so overwhelming in the 1920 and 1930s.”

In Parks, *A Hungry Heart*, op. cit., p. 323. I recall Parks making similar claims for *Leadbelly* during an exhibition of his work at the Laguna Gloria Art Museum in Austin, Texas in the 1970s.

38. Parks, *A Hungry Heart*, op. cit., p. 333.

39. Note omitted.

40. Chiwetel Ejiofor had the role of translator in *Amistad* (see Note 10) and was achieving global renown in roles as an African immigrant selling illegal body parts in Stephen Frears’ *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002) and playing against type a flamboyant drag queen who saves a failing shoe factory from bankruptcy in *Kinky Boots* (2005). It is his riveting role in *12 Years a Slave*, however, that is propelling him to multiple award nominations and superstardom.

41. Cited in Bilge Ebiri, “Horrendous Acts in a Beautiful Way: Behind the Scenes of *12 Years a Slave*,” *Vulture*, November 13, 2013 at <http://www.vulture.com/2013/11/behind-the-scenes-of-12-years-a-slave.html> (accessed on December 15, 2013).
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42. Northup, op. cit. p. 33. Northup says of Ford “there never was a more kind, noble, candid, Christian man than William Ford,” although

“the influences and associations that had always surrounded him, blinded him to the inherent wrong at the bottom of the system of Slavery. He never doubted the moral right of one man holding another in subjection. Looking through the same medium with his fathers before him, he saw things in the same light. Brought up under other circumstances and other influences, his notions would

undoubtedly have been different” (ibid).

Here Northup reveals impressive insight into how social conditions produce values, behavior, and ideologies, points articulated during the same period by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology* and *Communist Manifesto*.

43. See Northup, op. cit., pp 40ff for his narrative account of the episode. Northup’s text is more complex and detailed than McQueen’s modernist film rendition with its long expository passages where Platt is rented out to Tibbeats, who torments him, but whose labor is managed by an overseer Mr. Chapin, whose character is not fleshed out in McQueen’s condensed version.

44. Actually, Northup himself notes Epps’ “inhuman throng” from which he has escaped and describes Epps in the same passage as:

“a man in whose heart the quality of kindness or of justice is not found. A rough, rude energy, united with an uncultivated mind and an avaricious spirit, are his prominent characteristics. He is known as a ‘nigger breaker,’ distinguished for his faculty of subduing the spirit of the slave, and priding himself upon his reputation in this respect, as a jockey boasts of his skill in managing a refractory horse. He looked upon a colored man, not as a human being, responsible to his Creator for the small talent entrusted to him, but as a ‘chattel personal,’ as mere live property, no better, except in value, than his mule or dog.” (Northup, 1853: 75).

45. Northup also describes the almost superhuman features of Patsey in a relatively long passage in his narrative (pp. 77-78), writing:

"Patsey was slim and straight. She stood erect as the human form is capable of standing. There was an air of loftiness in her movement, that neither labor, nor weariness, nor punishment could destroy. Truly, Patsey was a splendid animal, and were it not that bondage had enshrouded her intellect in utter and everlasting darkness, would have been chief among ten thousand of her people. She could leap the highest fences, and a fleet hound it was indeed, that could outstrip her in a race. No horse could fling her from his back. She was a skillful teamster. She turned as true a furrow as the best, and at splitting rails there were none who could excel her. When the order to halt was heard at night, she would have her mules at the crib, unharnessed, fed and curried, before uncle Abram had found his hat. Not, however, for all or any of these, was she chiefly famous. Such lightning-like motion was in her fingers as no other fingers ever possessed, and therefore it was, that in cotton picking time, Patsey was queen of the field."

"She had a genial and pleasant temper, and was faithful and obedient. Naturally, she was a joyous creature, a laughing, light-hearted girl, rejoicing in the mere sense of existence. Yet Patsey wept oftener, and suffered more, than any of her companions. She had been literally excoriated. Her back bore the scars of a

thousand stripes; not because she was backward in her work, nor because she was of an mindful and rebellious spirit, but because it had fallen to her lot to be the slave of a licentious master and a jealous mistress. She shrank before the lustful eye of the one, and was in danger even of her life at the hands of the other, and between the two, she was indeed accursed. In the great house, for days together, there were high and angry words, poutings and estrangement, whereof she was the innocent cause. Nothing delighted the mistress so much as to see her suffer, and more than once, when Epps had refused to sell her, has she tempted me with bribes to put her secretly to death, and bury her body in some lonely place in the margin of the swamp. Gladly would Patsey have appeased this unforgiving spirit, if it had been in her power, but not like Joseph, dared she escape from Master Epps, leaving her garment in his hand. Patsey walked under a cloud. If she uttered a word in opposition to her master's will, the lash was resorted to at once, to bring her to subjection; if she was not watchful when about her cabin, or when walking in the yard, a billet of wood, or a broken bottle perhaps, hurled from her mistress' hand, would smite her unexpectedly in the face. The enslaved victim of lust and hate, Patsey had no comfort of her life." Northup, 1853: 77.

This passage shows how Northup found Patsey an altogether exceptional woman, qualities not adequately presented in either Parks' or McQueen's film. Parks substitution of a more muted and stereotyped character Jenny for Patsey shows his use of familiar character types in a classically realist narrative. McQueen, by contrast, goes for extremes and shock effects, making his Patsey the best cotton-picker on Epps' plantation, but focuses her character as the object of Epps' sexual obsession and of intense conflict with Epps' wife.

46. McQueen's film was dismissed as "torture porn" in an attack by Armond White, "Can't Trust It," *City Arts*, October 16, 2013 at <http://cityarts.info/2013/10/16/cant-trust-it/> (accessed December 16, 2013).

47. Northup depicts Shaw, the neighboring plantation owner as "a gambler and unprincipled man. He had made a wife of his slave Charlotte and a brood of young mulattoes were growing up in his house" (1853: 96).

48. Steve McQueen, cited in Bilge Ebiri, "Horrendous Acts in a Beautiful Way: Behind the Scenes of *12 Years a Slave*," *Vulture*, November 13, 2013 at <http://www.vulture.com/2013/11/behind-the-scenes-of-12-years-a-slave.html> (accessed on December 18, 2013).

49. Northup presents Bass as "a man whose true heart overflowed with noble and generous emotions... He was liberal to a fault," (1853: 111. Gordon Parks introduces Bass as a contrarian arguing against slavery with Epps and a group of Southern gentleman on a plantation porch. Parks' Bass good-naturedly prods Platt/Northup on his views of slavery, and then befriends him as they work together, promising to get word to Northup's friends and family up North and getting documents that attest Northup was a free man, which he does, making Bass a hero in the narrative of Northup's liberation in the

original text and both films.

50. In “Commitment,” T.W. Adorno writes:

“It is not the office of art to spotlight alternatives, but to resist by its form alone the course of the world, which permanently puts a pistol to men’s heads...Kafka’s prose and Beckett’s plays, or the truly monstrous novel *The Unnameable*, have an effect by comparison with which officially committed works look like pantomimes. Kafka and Beckett arouse the fear which existentialism merely talks about...The inescapability of their work compels the change of attitude which committed works merely demand.”

In *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: New Left Books, 1977), pp. 180, 191).

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



In *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. addresses the “burden of representation” that goes along with being a black man in 20th century United States.

Django Unchained: thirteen ways of looking at a black film

by [Heather Ashley Hayes](#) and [Gilbert B. Rodman](#)

[Originally published in *Quentin Tarantino’s Django Unchained: The Continuation of Metacinema* (Oliver C. Speck, ed.). New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014. Reprinted with permission.]

I.

“We can agree that the notion of a unitary black man is as imaginary (and as real) as Wallace Stevens’s blackbirds are; and yet to be a black man in twentieth-century America is to be heir to a set of anxieties: beginning with what it means to *be* a black man. All of the protagonists of this book confront the ‘burden of representation,’ the homely notion that you represent your race, thus that your actions can betray your race or honor it. . . . Each, in his own way, rages against the dread requirement *to represent*; against the demands of ‘authenticity.’” (Gates, 1997: xvii)

Django Unchained was heir to a particular set of racial anxieties from its inception, carrying a “burden of representation” on its shoulders that no single film could possibly bear. In contrast to the black men who populate Gates’ book, however, *Django*’s burden was taken on knowingly and willingly. The people who made *Django* knew they were making a risky film. They also knew that “dangers are not places you run away from but places that you go towards” (Hall, 1992: 285). Making a film about chattel slavery in the United States is an inherently dangerous undertaking that is guaranteed to upset a lot of people. *Django* isn’t an important film, however, simply because it pushes people’s buttons: it is an important film because it tells a story about race and racism that desperately needs to be told.

II.

Django is a black film. More than that, it is an exemplary black film. We would even go so far as to say that it is one of the most important black films of the century . . . which is where some of you will interrupt us to point out that Quentin Tarantino, the film’s director and screenwriter, is white, making it impossible for *Django* to be a black film.

So we begin again, in order to clear up some misconceptions about “black film” that stand in the way of the argument we want to make about *Django*. Typically, the term is used to refer to films that are made by (actual) black people, offer depictions of (authentic) black experience, and/or are primarily intended for



As a major Hollywood film about chattel slavery in the antebellum South, *Django Unchained* carried its own heavy “burden of representation” from the moment it was first conceived.



Django's director and screenwriter, Quentin Tarantino, is white: a fact that would seem to rule out the possibility that the film can safely be understood as an example of "black film."



Who deserves to be recognized as the author of a film like *The Shining*? Director Stanley Kubrick?...



.... Author Stephen King (whose novel of the same title was the basis for the film's screenplay)?...

(real) black audiences. Taken at face value, *Django* falls short on at least two of those counts—but taking things at “face value” is precisely the sort of uncritical interpretive stance that we want to avoid. Embedded in the claim that white directors cannot make black films are two problematic assumptions: one about essentialism, and one about auteurism.

The essentialist assumption is that there is a direct relationship between people’s racial identities (on the one hand) and the aesthetic, cultural, and/or political characteristics of whatever art they make (on the other). Only black people, the argument goes, have enough firsthand knowledge of “the black experience” to represent that experience properly in art. Because white people lack such knowledge, their efforts to tell black stories and/or work within black aesthetics are inevitably inferior and/or politically problematic (e.g., *Mississippi Burning*, 1988).

Meanwhile, the auteurist assumption is the widespread belief that we can reasonably attribute cinematic authorship to lone individuals. Typically, this distinction is reserved for directors, though occasionally producers may be granted such honors. So Alfred Hitchcock (rather than screenwriter Ernest Lehman) is widely understood as the main creative force behind *North by Northwest* (1959), Stanley Kubrick (rather than Stephen King) gets credit for *The Shining* (1980), Orson Welles (rather than Herman Mankiewicz) is celebrated for *Citizen Kane* (1941), and so on.

In the case at hand, auteurism tells us that Tarantino—and only Tarantino—deserves credit (or blame) for *Django*. Meanwhile, essentialism tells us that Tarantino’s whiteness prevents him from understanding black culture well enough to capture its essence on film. Taken together, these philosophies tell us that *Django* can’t possibly be a black film, because only directors matter when it comes to cinematic authorship, and because white directors cannot make black films. Neither of these seemingly straightforward claims, however, manages to reflect the realities of authorship or identity very well.

If auteurist visions of the singular genius artist work at all, it is only for the small number of aesthetic practices that are feasible as solo efforts: for example, novel writing, poetry, painting. Most art forms, however, simply do not function this way. As the most collaborative of all major art forms, however, film is especially ill-suited to this particular understanding of authorship. Even the most low-budget feature film requires creative input from hundreds of different people. To be sure, a film’s cast and crew are not an egalitarian commune in which artistic decisions are made through a democratic process, and directors exert far more creative control over “their” films than (for example) key grips or lighting technicians. But directors never make films alone. Whatever creative genius Tarantino brought to the making of *Django* (and there was certainly plenty of this), it would not be such an aesthetically rich, politically savvy film without significant creative labor from its principal actors (Jamie Foxx, Samuel L. Jackson, Christoph Waltz, Leonardo DiCaprio, and Kerry Washington), its cinematographer (Robert Richardson), its editor (Fred Raskin), and its production designer (J. Michael Riva).

Moreover, even if one believes that Tarantino really is the principal creative force behind “his” films, his most striking auteurish contributions come from his liberal borrowing of shots, scenes, costuming, and characters from Blaxploitation films, martial arts films, spaghetti westerns, and the like. Significantly, most of those genres depend heavily on non-Western, non-white, and/or hybrid aesthetic styles. To be sure, Tarantino blends these genres in ways that give “his” films a recognizable feel of their own, but the resulting style is much closer to a remix or mashup aesthetic (Lessig, 2008) than it is to



... Lead actor Jack Nicholson? All, some, none of the above?



The long series of credits that roll at the end of any major motion picture stand as a testament to film's status as the most collaborative of all major art forms. Here is just one of the thirty-one slides that roll at the end of *Django*.



The Cosby Show was both celebrated for its realistic portrayal of "mainstream" (i.e. bourgeois) black life and critiqued for its failure to represent the struggles (cultural, social, economic, and political) that "real" black people face in their everyday lives.

traditional notions of a unique auteurish vision.^[1][\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

Essentialism is no more helpful than auteurism when it comes to understanding the relationship between artists and their creations. The apparent clarity of a categorical label (such as "black") hides a messy, thorny tangle (dare we call it a briar patch?) of context-dependent significations: enough so that, when one examines it closely, the essentialist equation—for example, that only "real" black people have access to "authentic" black experience—implodes.

The identity side of the equation depends on the notion that "race" is a natural phenomenon that can be used to accurately place the peoples of the world into discrete, non-overlapping categories. In actual practice, however, such categories vary significantly over time and across space—which makes them cultural and historical fictions, rather than universal, scientific facts. Moreover, as the growing population of self-identified multiracial people^[2] should remind us, those categories overlap a great deal. Racial identity is more of a finely granulated spectrum than a simple binary choice, which, in turn, makes it impossible to anchor the identity end of the essentialism equation with any precision.

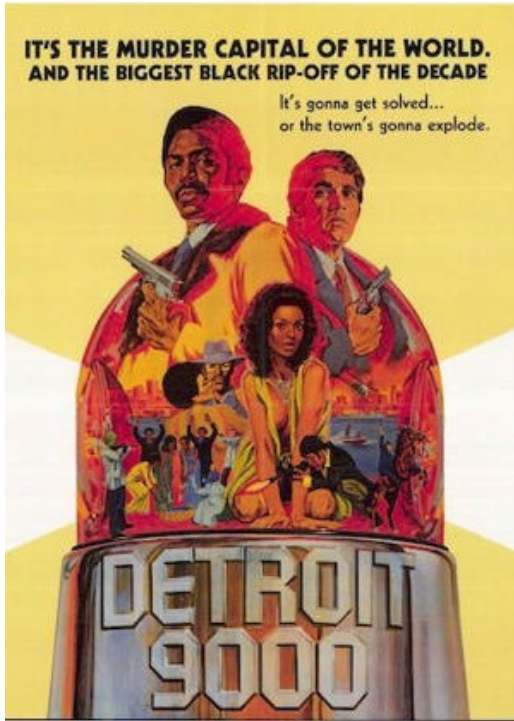
Meanwhile, at the other end of that equation, the abstract quality that is "blackness" is even harder to pin down. Debates over the politics of putatively black cultural texts routinely flounder over the question of what counts as "authentic" blackness in the first place. *The Cosby Show*, for example, was *both* celebrated for its realistic portrayal of "mainstream" (i.e., bourgeois) black life *and* critiqued for its failure to represent the struggles (cultural, social, economic, political) that "real" black people face in their everyday lives—with much of the debate hinging on the question of whether upper-middle class blacks or working class blacks count as the "true" face of black America (Dyson, 1993: 78-87; Gray, 1995: 79-84; Jhally and Lewis, 1992). What such divergent analyses reveal is that "blackness" is far too variable to be understood as a homogeneous phenomenon. There is no singular "black experience," and no individual black person has access to the full range (or even the majority) of different "black experiences" that one might name.

III.

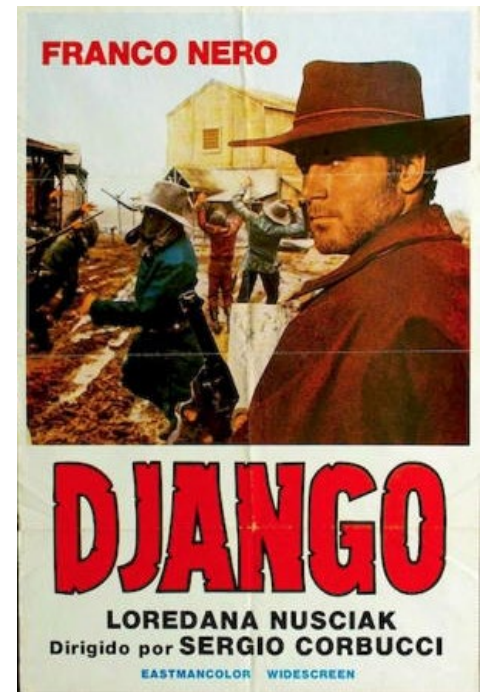
In spite of all their unavoidable messiness, racial labels perform significant (albeit not always positive) work in the world. The imprecision of such terms doesn't render them meaningless or useless, but it suggests that we need to think about them in more nuanced ways than essentialism allows. With respect to "black film," we want to suggest two related possibilities: one descriptive, the other prescriptive.

On the descriptive side of things, we would argue that "black film" doesn't refer to a set of natural, essentialist truths as much as it does a range of culturally specific *articulations* (Hall, 1986). Writing about this issue as it relates to rap, Gil Rodman has argued that,

"insofar as they help to shape the musical terrain in significant fashion, these racialized ways of categorizing music are very real—and very powerful—but they are not simply natural facts. Rather, they are culturally constructed *articulations*: processes by which otherwise unrelated cultural phenomena—practices, beliefs, texts, social groups, and so on—come to be linked together in a meaningful and *seemingly* natural way." (2006: 107)



Tarantino has acknowledged that major influences on his approach to filmmaking include Blaxploitation films (such as *Detroit 9000*), martial arts films (such as *Fists of the White Lotus*), and spaghetti westerns (such as the original *Django*).



We can—and should—understand “black film” in a similar capacity, especially insofar as many films that fit the category quite “naturally” (e.g., Blaxploitation classics such as *Coffy* (1973) and *Foxy Brown* (1974)) were actually made by white directors and thus fail the essentialism/auterism test. By the same token, this understanding of the term frees us from having to squeeze *all* films made by black people into the category by default.[3]

More prescriptively, we want to suggest that the modifier “black” should be understood as a marker of progressive, anti-racist politics, rather than as a “simple” statement about a filmmaker’s racial identity. Addressing a much broader version of the essentialism question (i.e., “Black Like Who?”), *Village Voice* columnist Joe Wood makes the following argument:

“We need a clearly articulated theory of coalition—political, economic, and cultural coalition across biological, and class, and cultural lines—towards the liberation of African and other marginal peoples. Such a theory would be a new ‘black’ objectivism, a grand theory that would include an expansive and progressive definition of ‘blackness,’ one to describe African folk who choose ‘blackness,’ as well as any fellow travellers. . . . Next go-round we’ll drop Clarence Thomas quickly, and with theoretical confidence. And we won’t confuse questions about Michael Jackson’s African authenticity with the nuts and bolts concerns—his political loyalty, his ‘blackness.’ . . . If ‘black’ the term is to be of any use, it ought to mean something, and not any old African thing. (1991: 39)[4]

To understand “black film” in *this* context is to insist that any film worthy of the label do significant work toward identifying, condemning, and dismantling systemic and institutional racism. It also necessarily opens the door for “fellow

travelers”—political allies who are not black—to make “black film.”

This is not to advance some sort of simple “colorblind” claim in which racial identity is wholly irrelevant to someone’s capacity for making black film. Undoubtedly, it is much harder for white filmmakers (be they directors or not) to make “black film” than it is for black filmmakers to do so, since most white people have never had to face the harsh realities of systemic racism in the way that people of color (filmmakers or not) are forced to every day. Because the meaningful relationship here, however, is about articulation, rather than identity, it is still possible (even if it is rare) for white people to make black films. We would not claim that all (or even most) of Tarantino’s directorial efforts meet the criteria we describe here—but *Django* most certainly does.



Two of the most celebrated examples of the Blaxploitation genre—*Coffy* and *Foxy Brown*—were directed by a white man, Jack Hill.

IV.

One of the most troubling aspects of the auteurist bias in the public discourse around *Django* is the way that commentators have routinely overlooked the agency of the film’s black actors. For example, a *Moviemaniacs* roundtable interview with Tarantino and the film’s major cast members begins with a question for Tarantino about *his* “sense of responsibility...in terms of making a movie that brings slavery out front and center like this,” but the actors are not addressed as if they, too, had made important creative contributions to the film. Instead, they are asked for their thoughts on Tarantino’s artistic vision: e.g. “When you read the script, what were your first impressions?” (*Moviemaniacs*, 2013). Similarly, in an ABC News *Nightline* interview with Tarantino, Foxx, and DiCaprio, Cynthia McFadden spends several minutes focusing on the risks that Tarantino took by using “the n-word” so liberally, and the risks that DiCaprio took by choosing to play a character of “pure evil” in a supporting role—but she has nothing to say that recognizes the choices (risky or otherwise) that Foxx made with respect to *Django* (ABC News, 2013). Even Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (who really should know better) spends the majority of a three-part interview with Tarantino about the film (2012a, 2012b, 2012c) asking questions that frame the film as the exclusive by-product of Tarantino’s creative vision.



Moviemaniacs interview with some of *Django*’s main cast and crew, (L to R) Jonah Hill, Don Johnson, Kerry Washington, Jamie Foxx, Quentin Tarantino, Christoph Waltz, Leonardo DiCaprio, Samuel L. Jackson, and Walter

Goggins.



One of Hollywood's most embarrassing treatments of U.S. slavery is the 1946 Disney film, *Song of the South*.

Perhaps the most ironic version of this erasure of black agency, however, comes from Dexter Gabriel (2013). In an otherwise convincing essay about the history of Hollywood's (largely abysmal) efforts to depict slavery, he derides *Django* as nothing more than a white fantasy about black acquiescence:

"While Django (Jamie Foxx) takes his cues from Blaxploitation, his fellow slaves seem throwbacks to the old plantation epics. Dazed and voiceless, they stand around as backdrops to Django's heroics. The one standout role, the sinister Stephen (Samuel Jackson), recycles 'Lost Cause' caricatures of the faithful Tom stitched together with contemporary African-American folklore on so-called house versus field slaves. In this post-racial revision of American history, mythical Uncle Toms and sadistic whites collude to maintain slavery—a clever moral escape-hatch to negate white guilt and guarantee crossover appeal." (2013)

Gabriel may have a point about the silent docility of most of the slaves in *Django* (though, even here, he ignores the fact that film extras are *supposed* to be voiceless backdrops), but his larger argument only works if the film's black actors are too "dazed and voiceless" to contest (what he takes to be) Tarantino's racist fantasies—or, worse, if those actors are modern day Uncle Toms who are all too eager to do a white man's bidding. Either way, Gabriel winds up transforming Foxx, Jackson, and company into the very same caricatures that he dismisses as "mythical."

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

V.



Django's black actors repeatedly had to interrupt interviewers and reframe the questions being asked of them in order to explain their own political stakes in making the movie, and to tell tales of how they made significant contributions to how the film was made.



The scene in which Broomhilda is whipped. Jamie Foxx chose the tone-setting music played on the set before the scene was shot, and noted that, as the cast and crew worked that day, “everybody had tears in their eyes, you felt the ancestors, you felt the significance of why we’re doing this film and showing it this way.”

Time and time again, *Django's* black actors have to interrupt their interviewers and/or reframe the questions being asked of them in order to be seen as anything more than Tarantino's hired help. Significantly, when those actors get to talk about what *they* find important about *Django*, they consistently demonstrate a deep concern for the representational burden the film carries, and offer nuanced thoughts on the film's anti-racist politics. For instance, Foxx has to forcibly insert himself into the *Nightline* conversation mentioned earlier in order to establish that he, too, had significant choices to make with respect to respect to the making of *Django*. Eventually, he manages to tell a story about filming the scene in which Broomhilda is whipped:

“Everybody, people on trucks, people in catering, stood still . . . I asked for a certain piece of music, Fred Hammond, ‘No Weapons.’ So as Kerry's being strapped up, we played that song. . . . I looked over and saw a girl who had never been on a set before and she was one of the extras and her hands went up like this, she started testifying. And as everybody had tears in their eyes, you felt the ancestors, you felt the significance of why we're doing this film and showing it this way.” (ABC News, 2013)

Here, Foxx doesn't just push back against critiques of the film's “disrespectful” representation of slavery (specifically Spike Lee's claim that the film is an insult to his ancestors): he makes a powerful argument about the historical and political significance of the project to the black cast (stars and extras alike) who worked on it.

Similarly, during the *Moviemaniacs* roundtable, Washington explicitly points out that the film is about “the *institution* of slavery” (emphasis added), and claims that she chose to make this film precisely because it offers an exceptionally positive vision of black empowerment:

“So many of the narratives that we've told in film and television about slavery are about powerlessness, and this is not a film about that. . . . I was very moved by the love story, particularly in a time in our American history when black people were not allowed to fall in love and get married because that kind of connection got in the way of the selling of human beings. . . . I said to Quentin in our first meeting, I feel like I want to do this movie for my father because my father grew up in a world where there were no black superheroes, and that's what this movie is.” (Moviemaniacs, 2013)

In that same roundtable, Jackson has to remind the interviewer that he (Jackson) isn't just a voiceless body (“You don't want to know how I felt about all this? . . . I have intelligent things to say about this shit.”). When the interviewer presses on, trying to get Jackson to discuss the “psychology” of Stephen and the “small power” he has in the story, Jackson responds, “Small power? I'm the power behind the throne. What are you talking about? I'm like the spook Cheney of Candyland. I'm all up in that.” (Moviemaniacs, 2013).



Kerry Washington emphasizes that, for her, the film is about “the institution of slavery,” the power of a love story between two black slaves, and the value of producing a movie featuring a black superhero.



Dismissing the notion that his character, Stephen, has “small power” in the film, Samuel L. Jackson claims that Stephen is “the power behind the throne” and “the spook Cheney of Candyland.”

Jackson's point about Stephen's backstage power also describes the roles that he, Foxx, and Washington played in shaping the film. They are the power behind Tarantino's throne. They not only have intelligent things to say about *Django*: they had intelligent things to contribute to making it the articulate condemnation of structural racism that it is.

VI.

Without a doubt, the most controversial character in *Django* is Stephen: the cunningly cruel “head house nigger” of Candyland. Why, some critics have wondered, did Tarantino make the nastiest villain in the film an over-the-top Uncle Tom? Where is the racial justice in a narrative that asks audiences to see Stephen, rather than Calvin Candie, as Django's ultimate nemesis? Why does a film that invites audiences to cheer for a black man who gets paid for killing white men (and who openly enjoys that aspect of his job) end with us rooting for that black man to kill another black man? (Cobb, 2013; Gabriel, 2013; Reece, 2013; Reed, 2012; White, 2012)



Stephen plays the part of a glad-handing (albeit smart-mouthed) sycophant in front of Candie's guests. Backstage, however, we see that he is the true brains behind Candie's plantation empire.

Implicit in such questions is a problematic desire for a simplistic morality play, in which heroes and villains obey a predictable set of color-coded rules. In classic Hollywood westerns, the heroes wore white and the villains wore black. For some of *Django*'s more skeptical viewers, this code apparently should have been flipped and then applied to skin tone, so that all the heroes were black and all the villains were white. Stephen clearly violates this typology, and he does so without a single sympathetic on-screen moment that might allow viewers to understand him as an erstwhile hero who has simply lost his way.

Of course, the absolute purity of Stephen's villainy makes him an easy character for audiences to hate—and, in many ways, this is precisely what makes so many critics uncomfortable with him. The idea that audiences—especially white audiences—might openly yearn for the violent death of a fictional black man is, after all, awfully close to the very real disdain that so many white Americans have for real black people. We can't entirely blame some critics for finding



A publicity photo for *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, demonstrating the “heroes wear white, villains wear black” code of classic Hollywood westerns. Left to right, villain Liberty Valance (Lee Marvin), heroes Tom Doniphon (John Wayne) and Ransom Stoddard (James Stewart).



Django's real villain is not Stephen or Candie. It's institutional racism, symbolized by Candyland, the “big house” of the most notorious plantation in the South.



The popular ITV series, *Downton Abbey*, is one of the most recent in a very long history of cinematic and television stories that represent the “big house” as a noble institution that deserves respect and veneration.

Stephen to be distasteful. Yet we can't quite share this reading of his character. Partially, this is because a weak, ineffectual Stephen would have been just as problematic in terms of representational politics. It's hard to imagine any of the critics who disliked Stephen as a villainous race traitor being any happier with him as a shuffling, ignorant pawn for Candie to push around. Partially, this is because we see a great deal of political value in a film that places *two* exceptionally strong black characters at the center of the action—even if they happen to be on opposite sides of the narrative struggle—especially since it's still rare for a mainstream Hollywood film to give audiences even one such character. And partially, this is because, in the context of the film's action, it's almost impossible to actively root for Stephen's righteous comeuppance without simultaneously rooting for Django to deliver the *coup de grâce*. If *Django*'s white viewers are going to cheer for the death of a black villain, they also have to cheer for the triumph of a black hero.

Mostly, though, we have a difficult time condemning Stephen as a character because, short of making the entire movie about him (and probably not even then), there is no feasible way to portray the “head house nigger” of one of the largest and most notorious plantations in the South as a sympathetic or politically progressive character. The problem with Stephen, after all, isn't in how Tarantino scripted the character: it's that he exists at all. Critics who want something else from Stephen seem to believe that there's some politically acceptable way to depict a black slave whose primary role in life is to keep his wealthy white owner's household running smoothly: a role which, in turn, requires him to actively participate in maintaining the brutal hierarchy of racial oppression that lies at the core of the plantation system.

VII.

Django's real villain is not Stephen or Candie. It's not even a person at all. It's racism. And not racism as a scattered problem produced by isolated, individual bigots, but racism as a pervasive, unrelenting *structural* phenomenon—and this is a large part of what makes *Django* such an unusual and important film. There is nothing romantic about *Django*'s depiction of life in the antebellum South. From top to bottom, this is a world built out of brutal oppression and cruel racial hierarchy. If there's a physical embodiment of racism in the world of *Django*, it's Candyland: the notorious “big house” that every slave knows about (and fears being sold to), and that—significantly—Django blows to smithereens at the end of the film.

There is, of course, a very long history of “big houses”—from English manors to Dixieland plantations—in mainstream film and television: glorious mansions, populated by chivalrous gentlemen and virtuous ladies who, in turn, are waited on hand and foot by a sizable retinue of happy, loyal, docile servants/slaves. What makes Candyland so different from a century of fictional big houses before it, though, isn't the treachery of Stephen. If anything, Stephen's role is no different than that of any semi-privileged house slave in classic Hollywood depictions of antebellum plantations. To the degree that such characters were ever presented to viewers as more than just silent props, they showed fawning, unswerving devotion to their masters and mistresses: they were always already race traitors.[5] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] The difference here is that *Django* doesn't take the house's side. Stephen can only be a villainous character in the context of a film that gives us “the big house” as the fundamental structural evil that needs to be destroyed.

Within the world of the film, there was no need for Django to do anything about



At the end of the film, after saving his wife and securing safe passage away from Candyland, Django doesn't leave the "big house" standing. His revenge narrative is not complete until he strikes a fatal (albeit largely symbolic) blow to the heart of the institution of slavery.



Stephen's dying monologue serves to remind the film's audience that Django's victory is only a symbolic one, and that institutionalized racism and slavery will not end with Stephen's death. "You can't destroy Candyland! We been here—they's always gonna be a Candyland! Can't no nigger gunfighter kill all the white folks in the world! They gonna find yo' black ass!"



Stuart Hall, one of the leading figures in cultural studies, argues strongly against an essentialist understanding of media representations. "Films," he writes, "are not necessarily good because black people make them. They are not necessarily 'right-on' by virtue of the fact that they deal with the black experience."

the "big house" at all. Except for Stephen, he had killed everyone who stood between him and freedom for himself and Broomhilda—and Stephen was no longer a threat. Django could have killed Stephen—or even just walked away from him—without touching the house at all. Django doesn't blow up Candyland because *he* needs to do so: he blows it up because *we* need him to do so. By this point in the story, *Django* has spent nearly three hours painting a picture of a society permeated, top to bottom, by a deep and abiding racism. If Django is going to triumph against *that* villain, he can't just kill off Candie and Stephen and then ride off into the night with Hildy: he needs to kill "the big house" too. Stephen's final speech underscores this point emphatically:

"You ain't gonna get away wit' this, Django. They gonna catch yo' black ass. You gonna be on the wanted posters now, nigger. Them bounty hunters gonna be lookin' for you. You can run, nigger, but they gonna find yo' ass. And when they do, oh I *love* what they gonna do to yo' ass. They ain't gonna just kill you, nigger. You done fucked up. This Candyland, nigger! You can't destroy Candyland! We been here—they's *always* gonna be a Candyland! . . . Can't no nigger gunfighter kill all the white folks in the world! They gonna find yo' black ass!"

Stephen knows—and the inclusion of this speech in the film is an attempt to make sure that *we* know—that Django's destruction of Candyland is supposed to symbolize something bigger than just the end of a quest for personal revenge. But Stephen also knows that Django's victory is only a symbolic one: that you can't kill systemic racism with nothing but bullets and dynamite. It will survive this setback. And it will come after Django with a furious vengeance.

VIII.

Discussing *My Beautiful Laundrette*, and the debates that it sparked in Britain in the 1980s about the politics of racial representation, Stuart Hall writes:

"Films are not necessarily good because black people make them. They are not necessarily 'right-on' by virtue of the fact that they deal with the black experience. Once you enter the politics of the end of the essential black subject you are plunged headlong into the maelstrom of a continuously contingent, unguaranteed, political argument and debate: a critical politics, a politics of criticism. You can no longer conduct black politics through the strategy of a simple set of reversals, putting in the place of the bad old essentialist white subject, the new essentially good black subject." (1996: 443-444)

Ironically, the major U.S. filmmaker whose work embodies this philosophy most fully is Spike Lee. Part of what makes Lee's films powerful and refreshing is that they routinely portray blackness as a variable, multifaceted, heterogeneous phenomenon. *Do the Right Thing*, *Bamboozled*, *School Daze*, *Jungle Fever* (etc.) all contain an incredibly broad range of black characters. Some are sweet, some are mean; some are good, some are evil; some are smart, some are dumb; some are kind, some are cruel. We are invited to root for some of them to succeed and for others to get a truly righteous comeuppance. There is no singular blackness in Lee's cinematic worlds: an extraordinarily rare thing in Hollywood's depictions of black America.

Nonetheless, Lee has done a curious two-step around *Django*. On the one hand, he wants to avoid talking about it publicly. On the other hand, he's made very public statements claiming that film is "disrespectful to [his] ancestors"

(VibeTV, 2012). It's likely that part of Lee's disdain for *Django* is tied up with his long-running public feud with Tarantino over the latter's heavy use of the word "nigger" in "his" films.[6] We can respect Lee's point that "nigger" signifies in *much* different ways when it's used by white people than when it is by black people. White artists, after all, have a long, ugly history of "blackening" up in ways that read more as theft than as love (Lott, 1993).



White artists have a long, ugly history of "blackening" up in ways that read more as theft than as love....



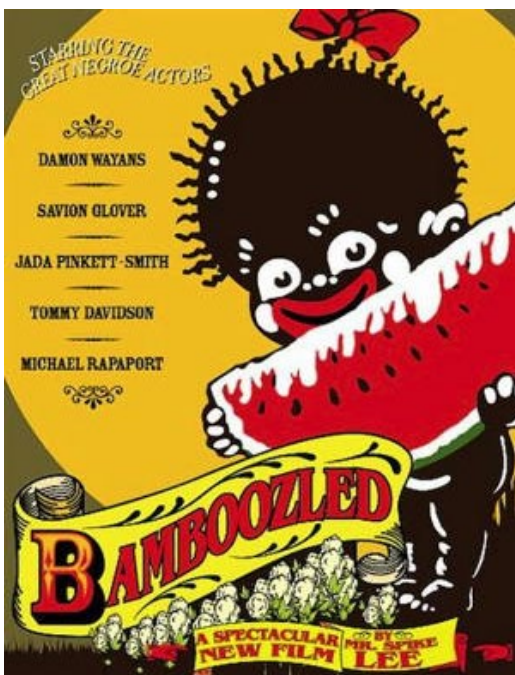
... Here, Bing Crosby carries on this tradition as a blackface Abraham Lincoln in *Holiday Inn*.

At the same time, however, we respect Tarantino's artistic right to create characters who say and do all sorts of "bad" things. And given the physical brutality that Tarantino's characters routinely inflict on one another, it's hardly surprising that they speak to each other using coarse, impolitic language. Moreover, a film that focuses on slavery in the antebellum South is almost obligated to use "nigger" on a regular basis. In this sense, *Django* is a lot like *Huck Finn*: if you are going to tell this story with anything that pretends to have a semblance of historical accuracy, then you *have* to use the word—and use it a lot.

More problematically, Lee has said that he has no intention of seeing *Django*. And it's disheartening to see him so thoroughly condemn a film he hasn't seen—not the least because Lee has been subject to plenty of that sort of blind, reactionary condemnation himself. Lee has also wandered into some exceptionally murky waters with respect to ugly representations of black people on the big screen. For example, *Bamboozled*, while a brilliant piece of work, produced its own fair share of audience discomfort with its depictions of contemporary blackface minstrelsy. Perhaps more than any other working director, Lee should be aware that smart, politically progressive films about racism will necessarily take their audiences places where they will be uncomfortable. Discomfort for discomfort's sake, of course, is not desirable in and of itself—but Lee should at least see the film before he declares that its representational politics are unacceptable.

IX.

As filmmakers, Lee and Tarantino are actually very much alike: they're both opinionated, cantankerous, provocative directors and screenwriters, each of whom has risked alienating the established powers in Hollywood by pursuing controversial projects that suit their respective artistic and/or political visions. One of the main places where their careers have differed, however, is that Lee has had to struggle far harder than Tarantino in order to get his films financed and completed (Exhibit A: *Malcolm X* (Lee, 1993); Exhibit B: Lee crowdfunding his most recent film (Lee, 2013)). That Tarantino could get "green-lighted" to make a film like *Django*—i.e., a violent revenge fantasy in which a black man rides roughshod over antebellum white America—must be a bitter pill for Lee to



Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* provoked significant controversy over its own depictions of contemporary blackface minstrelsy—which should have served to remind Lee that smart,

politically progressive films about racism will necessarily take their audience places where they will be uncomfortable.



The institutional racism of Hollywood helps to explain why Tarantino can readily secure funding to make a film like *Django*, while Lee was forced to crowdfund his 2013 film, *Oldboy*, using Kickstarter.

swallow.

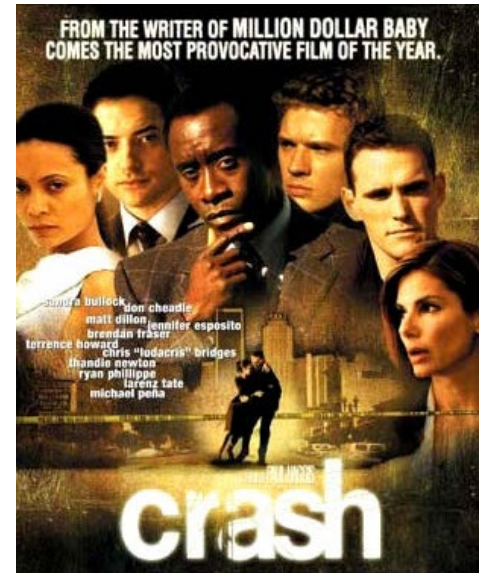
In this light, though, the proper target for Lee's righteous anger isn't *Django*, or even Tarantino. It's the larger set of institutional forces related to how Hollywood makes films about black culture, history, and politics. To this end, we would pose the following questions:

- Why have Hollywood films featuring black action heroes enacting revenge fantasies largely, if not entirely, been confined to the “campy,” marginalized genre of blaxploitation? Where is the black version of *Rambo*? Or *Die Hard*?
- Why is it that the few Hollywood films that focus on slavery and the antebellum south inevitably do so from the perspective of white characters? Why hasn't there been a major motion picture made about Nat Turner, Harriet Tubman, or Frederick Douglass?
- Why is it that black directors and producers trying to make politically charged films about contemporary versions of “the black experience” can only seem to find major financial backing to do so if they focus on ghettos, gangsta rap, and/or modern-day minstrelsy?
- Why is it that major “message” films about U.S. racism are either historical narratives (e.g. *The Butler*, *The Help*) that allow viewers to believe that racism is entirely a thing of the past, or they're “sensitive,” “balanced” stories (*Crash*) that pretend that racism is nothing more than individual bigotry (and to be “fair,” remind us that people of color can be bigots too)?

Ultimately, though, the amount of attention given to the ongoing Lee/Tarantino “feud” arguably does more to reproduce Hollywood's racism than it does to address that problem. What truly matters here, after all, isn't the public sniping between two “bad boy” film directors—even if that may provide gossip blogs with useful material—since that “story” merely reduces the issue to a clash of individual personalities, and it directs our attention away from the broader structural problems that help to fuel that feud in the first place.



Unfortunately, major “message” films about US racism tend to be either historical narratives (such as *The Help*) that allow viewers to believe that racism is entirely a thing of the past ...



... or “sensitive,” “balanced” stories (such as *Crash*) that pretend that racism is nothing more than individual bigotry (and to be “fair,” remind us that people of color can be bigots too).



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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

X.

Apparently, the film about slavery that the United States *really* wanted in 2012 wasn't *Django*: it was *Lincoln*. Directed by Steven Spielberg, with a masterful performance by Daniel Day Lewis in the title role, the film tells the story of Lincoln's embattled month surrounding the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment. Both films were written and directed by white men, but—tellingly—all seven of the principal actors in *Lincoln* are white, while three of *Django*'s five principal actors are black. *Lincoln* also somehow manages to erase Frederick Douglass from the historical debates that led to the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, opting instead to focus on white abolitionist and congressman Thaddeus Stevens. The only black characters in *Lincoln* come to us as nameless soldiers, slaves, or—most troublingly—Stevens' lover, whose only appearance in the film comes after the Thirteenth Amendment's passage. She's so grateful that she falls right into bed with Stevens.[7] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

The sharp differences in the ways that *Django* and *Lincoln* were (or were not) celebrated also tell us something significant about the sad state of contemporary U.S. racial politics. Perhaps the most obvious example of this differential treatment comes from Oprah Winfrey. In her latest television series, *Oprah's Next Chapter*, Winfrey dedicated an entire episode to *Lincoln*, which she prefaces by telling her audience:

"If you haven't seen *Lincoln* yet, I encourage you to do so. There really is nothing like it. . . . The entire film will reach into the marrow of your soul. . . . I can't remember when I've experienced anything like it. . . . [It] is a masterpiece." (Oprah Winfrey Network, 2012)

Two weeks later, Winfrey aired a two-part episode on Jamie Foxx, in which *Django* went unmentioned until the second hour of conversation. Tellingly, when Winfrey finally broaches the subject, she does so in clearly disapproving tones: "Everybody had read the script, a lot of people felt that this movie shouldn't have been made. . . . How are you going to react when people say 'what'd you do that for?'" Foxx responds with conviction:

"I don't feel that I'm dumb . . . and I don't feel that Samuel Jackson is dumb, and I don't feel Quentin Tarantino or Kerry Washington—we're not dumb guys in this business. . . . I didn't worry one iota of it is it gonna be ridiculed." (Oprah Winfrey Network, 2013)

Even after this eloquent defense of the film, however, Winfrey still seems unwilling to take the film anywhere near as seriously as she does *Lincoln*. All she can manage is the vague and awkward statement: "You can't imagine the conversations we're having today after seeing it."

Meanwhile, *Lincoln* was widely praised, not just as a major cinematic achievement, but as a significant political intervention. *New York Magazine* published a lengthy list of laudatory comments on the film from a bipartisan range of politicians (Rich, 2013). *Washington Post* columnist Ruth Marcus seemed to think that *Lincoln* could somehow fix everything that is broken about the U.S. government:



The film about slavery that the United States apparently really wanted in 2012 wasn't *Django*—it was *Lincoln*.



Lincoln's main cast was entirely white, even though Frederick Douglass (who is not depicted in the film at all) played a pivotal role in the historical debates at the core of the film's narrative.



Lincoln ends with a disturbing scene in which U.S. Senator Thaddeus Stevens (played by Tommy Lee Jones) presents his black servant (played by S. Epatha Merkerson) with a copy of the freshly passed Thirteenth Amendment as a “gift.” She’s so grateful that she falls right into bed with him.

“President Obama hosted a screening of Steven Spielberg’s *Lincoln* at the White House the other day. He should do it again—and again and again. For the subsequent showings, though, the president ought to invite every member of Congress. *Lincoln* is exquisitely crafted and even more exquisitely timed. . . . It presents useful lessons in the subtle arts of presidential leadership and the practice of politics, at once grimy and sublime.” (Marcus, 2012)

In this “Oprahfication” of *Lincoln*, the racial significance of the historical events that (supposedly) lie at the core of the narrative—the end of chattel slavery—is pushed to the side, in favor of a less threatening set of lessons: how powerful white men can protect the nation (and their own power) while keeping the culture’s major racial hierarchies firmly in place. In contrast, *Django*’s far more pointed lessons about the horrors of institutional racism have largely been ignored, and the film itself pushed to the margins of the “national conversation” on race (the one that we never *quite* seem to have) because the film is (allegedly) too controversial to take seriously—as art or as politics.



Oprah Winfrey dedicated an entire episode of *Oprah’s Next Chapter* to *Lincoln*, which she began by gushing, “There really is nothing like it...the entire film will reach into the marrow of your soul...I can’t remember when I’ve seen a film like it...[It] is a masterpiece.” Here, she is seen interviewing director Stephen Spielberg and lead actor Daniel Day-Lewis during this episode.



Oprah’s two-hour double episode of *Oprah’s Next Chapter* on Jamie Foxx in 2013 barely mentioned *Django* at all (despite it being his current film at the time of the interview). When she finally got around to discussing it, she had a hard time taking it seriously, and focused instead on the controversy surrounding the film: “Everybody had read the script, a lot of people felt that this movie shouldn’t have been made.”

XI.

Django begins with an astonishingly huge historical gaffe: a factual error so blatant, obvious, and easy to correct that it almost *has* to be deliberate. After the opening credits finish, a title appears indicating that the year is 1858—“Two years before the Civil War.” And, of course, the Civil War didn’t begin until April 1861. It is possible that somehow *no one* connected with the film’s production knew their U.S. history well enough to have caught this basic mistake. Or, perhaps, that no one cared enough to fix it.



Django begins with an astonishingly huge historical gaffe that places the start of the



The audience’s first glimpse of Hildy comes in fantasy/flashback cutaway that shows

U.S. Civil War in 1860, instead of 1861.

her occupying center stage under a glorious canopy of old willow trees.



A lush shot of a sumptuous cotton field (stereotypical Hollywood representation of the South) being sullied by a violent splattering of blood (stereotypical Tarantino fascination with violence).



Calvin Candie, aristocratic southern gentleman, first appears as he watches a mandingo fight in which two slaves try to beat each other to death with their bare hands.

More plausible, however, is the notion that Tarantino knew that the opening title was historically inaccurate in ways that millions of filmgoers would spot, and that he *chose* to keep the mistake in place deliberately. From the very start, he is signaling that he's more interested in telling a good story than he is in showing rigid fealty to historical facts. There is historical precision to be found here, but it revolves more around Tarantino demonstrating how thoroughly he knows cinematic history than it does around capturing the realities of mid-nineteenth century southern life.



Candie's widowed sister, genteel southern belle that she is, is responsible for delivering Hildy to King Schultz's room for what everyone involved (except Schultz and Django, of course) expects is an afternoon of sexual favors being provided to an honored houseguest.

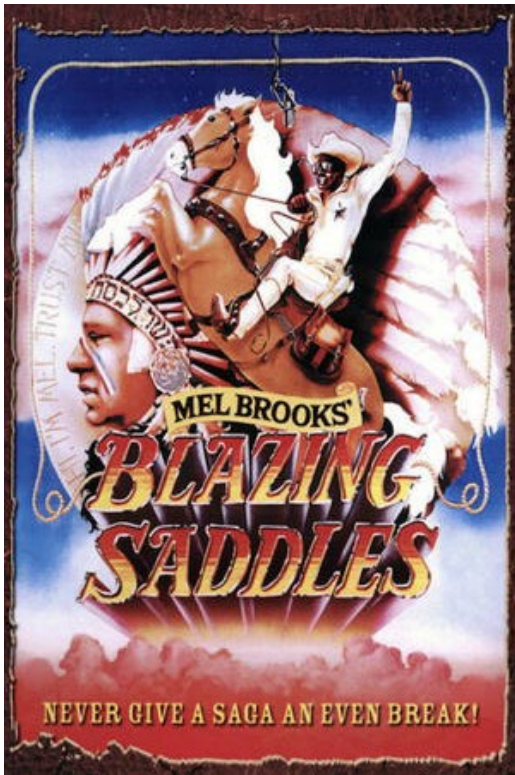


Gone With the Wind is perhaps the most widely revered of Hollywood's many historically dishonest representations of the antebellum South.

In part, *Django* demonstrates the depth of Tarantino's knowledge of, and love for, the B-movie genres from which he borrows so heavily. But the film is also a lesson about the problematic history of mainstream cinematic representations of blacks, slavery, and the (antebellum) south (Marcotte, 2013). What *Django* underscores—brutally so, at times—is the degree to which Hollywood has spent the past century producing outrageously dishonest visions of Dixie. *Django* doesn't do this, however, by presenting us with a painstakingly researched quasi-documentary account of what southern life in the 1850s was really like. Instead, it takes those old stereotypes, places them on the screen before us, and systematically shows us the social and political horrors that hide beneath their surfaces. Glamorous scenes of happy slaves enjoying the pastoral beauty of the land are merely Django's feverish fantasies of being reunited with his wife. A lush shot of a sumptuous cotton field is sullied by a violent splattering of blood from off-screen. The perfectly mannered, aristocratic southern gentleman first appears in a private club where he is watching two slaves try to beat each other to death with their bare hands. The genteel southern belle turns out to be little more than a glorified sex trafficker. And so on.

Very few mainstream Hollywood films have attempted this sort of frontal assault on Hollywood's history of racially problematic representations. Probably the best known (and, more sadly, probably the most recent) of such efforts is the 1974 comedic send-up of Hollywood westerns, *Blazing Saddles*. Most of the film's humor revolves around the appointment of a black man as the new sheriff of the all white town of Rock Ridge: a set-up that allows for ninety-five minutes of non-stop satirical jabs at bigotry and racial stereotypes. The film fared so well upon its initial release that it was re-released six months later to help boost a sluggish summer at the box office for Warner Brothers. In 2006, the Library of Congress deemed it worthy enough to preserve in the National Film Registry. Tellingly, though, *Saddles* was almost never released, because Warner Brothers executives were scared that the film's racial politics were too controversial, and that the film's use of "the n-word" would make it box office poison. As director Mel Brooks tells the story (Davis, 2012), what ultimately saved the film was a wildly successful in-house screening of a rough cut for studio underlings, and the fact that Brooks' contract gave him control over the film's final cut.

Arguably, part of what allowed *Saddles* to succeed—and still be heralded



Blazing Saddles is one of the tiny handful of mainstream Hollywood movies prior to *Django* that attempted to tackle Hollywood's history of racially problematic representations directly.



Saddles' political critique was vital and important, but it was also considerably softened by the film's use of comedy as its primary weapon against racism.

decades later as a classic—is that it used comedy as its primary weapon against “racism.” Also, it framed the problem as one rooted in individual bigotry, rather than as a structural, institutional force that shapes the entire culture. We don’t want to downplay the degree to which *Saddles*, like *Django*, was a politically dangerous film to make. But if a film that skewers racism as *gently* as *Saddles* does was almost too risky to release, then it’s not surprising—though it is disappointing—that it took nearly forty years before another mainstream Hollywood film would dare to tackle the subject so directly again.

XII.

Many observers have criticized *Django* for what it *doesn't* do in terms of portraying racial solidarity between blacks, or in terms of gesturing, even minimally, towards collective rebellion. And there’s some truth to be found in such critiques. *Django* is not a selfless martyr, choosing certain death over personal freedom because he cannot bear to leave his brothers and sisters behind in chains. Nor is he a remade Nat Turner, leading armies of slaves into open rebellion against white supremacy. His mission is purely personal (though not entirely selfish), and he is never distracted from it by even a moment of sympathetic solidarity for the obvious suffering of other black folk around him.

And that’s okay by us. At least for now. *Django* gives us a vision of racism as a cancer that permeates the entirety of U.S. society, top to bottom—and that is an extraordinarily rare thing for Hollywood. We can live with *Django*, the fictional man, getting to live out his personal revenge fantasy and ride off into the night with his one true love, because *Django*, the movie, doesn’t let audiences pretend that slavery was really just some sort of pleasant *Gone-With-the-Wind*-style costume drama after all.

More importantly, there’s a cruel, racialized double standard to the complaints that *Django* “fails” to present a sufficiently revolutionary narrative of black liberation. Hollywood hasn’t exactly demonstrated much desire, after all, to make feature films that portray *anyone’s* collective rebellion against systematic, institutional oppression. Sergei Eisenstein might have been able to make that sort of thing work in the heyday of Soviet silent film (*Battleship Potemkin*, *Strike*, *October*), but Hollywood invariably transforms collective political struggles into purely personal battles between individuals. Class struggle gets reduced to the heroic efforts of lone individuals to win a symbolic fight against a singularly evil boss (*Norma Rae*). Feminism gets reduced to the heroic efforts of lone individuals to win a symbolic fight against a singularly evil man (*9 to 5*). Anti-racism gets reduced to the heroic efforts of lone individuals to win a symbolic fight against a singularly evil bigot (*Driving Miss Daisy*). So why is it that people of color—both in real life and in fiction – are routinely expected to sacrifice their personal desires and ambitions for the sake of the collective? White people who work hard and overcome obstacles to rise out of poverty are never expected to “give back” to the impoverished communities they left behind—much less be publicly excoriated for “failing” to do such a thing in the ways that people of color are (Boyd, 2003; Gates, 1997).



Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* portrayed the kind of collective rebellion against systemic, institutional oppression that Hollywood has almost always avoided.



When Hollywood does take on political issues that could (and should) readily be framed as examples of systemic, institutional oppression, it invariably transforms what could be collective political struggles into purely personal battles between individuals. *Norma Rae* turns class struggle into a symbolic fight against a singularly evil boss, ...



9 to 5 turns feminism into a symbolic fight against a singularly evil man, ...



Driving Miss Daisy turns anti-racist struggle into a symbolic fight against a singularly evil bigot, and so on.

Similarly, one of Hollywood's oldest and most popular tropes is the man (or, occasionally, a woman) who sacrifices *everything*—family, friends, career, home, etc.—for the sake of his one true love, because “love conquers all”. . . though, significantly, this trope only really gets applied to white love. Hollywood, after all, rarely gives us love stories about people of color at all, and it certainly doesn't give us any such tales where the love in question is *celebrated* for being selfish and all-consuming in the way that white love routinely is. How many Hollywood films are there about white men who have somehow lost their one true loves, and where the driving force behind those



Casablanca was perhaps the last major U.S. film in which a white male hero willingly sacrifices his chance to be reunited with his one true love for the sake of a larger, more noble cause.

narratives is a purely personal quest to rescue/reclaim those lost women, rather than a political mission to repair/destroy the broken criminal justice system, military-industrial complex, capitalist economy, or whatever systemic inequity it is that has separated the happy couple? Dozens? Hundreds? Thousands? *Casablanca* may be the last major Hollywood movie where a white hero willingly sacrifices his chance to be reunited with his one true love for the sake of a larger, more noble cause—and that is arguably because, for all its charms, the film functions more as a form of historical war propaganda than as a love story.

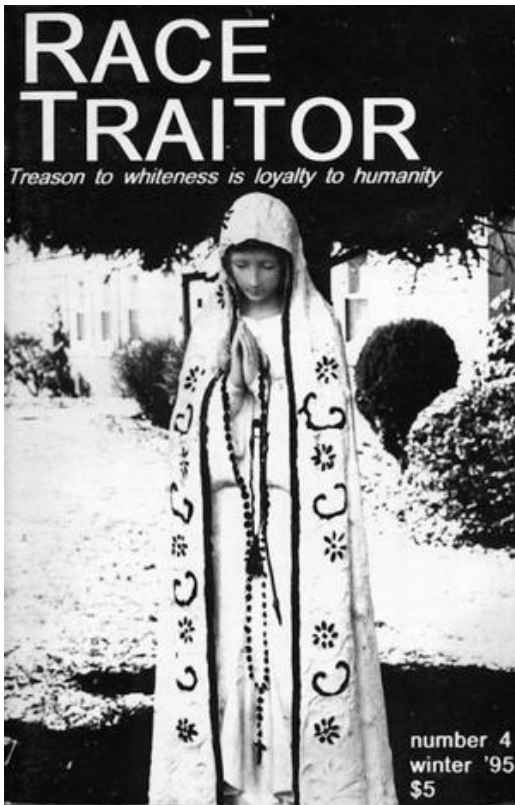
This begs the question: if Django were a *white* action hero, would we be having this debate at all? When Hollywood starts routinely giving us mainstream films dedicated to collective political agendas, then—and only then—can we start worrying about why more black heroes aren't positioned as the leaders of such efforts. In the meantime, however, expecting Django to (deep breath here) rise up out of slavery, learn to shoot better than anyone else in the South, scour the countryside for his lost wife, free her from bondage, organize and lead a massive slave revolt, destroy the plantation system, and bring about an end to white supremacy across the land (you can exhale now) is an unfair burden to place on any hero—or any film.

XIII.

“We recognize that this advice flies in the face of what is usually regarded as sound, practical sense. . . . The conventional wisdom teaches that the way to achieve social change is to strive to express the desires of an existing constituency. That is perhaps why most social reform is so useless. We are calling for the opposite: a minority willing to undertake outrageous acts of provocation, aware that they will incur the opposition of many who might agree with them if they adopted a more moderate approach. How many will it take? No one can say for sure. It is a bit like the problem of currency: how much counterfeit money has to circulate in order to destroy the value of the official currency? The answer is, nowhere near a majority—just enough to undermine public confidence in the official stuff.” (Ignatiev and Garvey, 1996: 36-37)

There are people (e.g., Kaplan, 2012) who want to open up a long overdue conversation about slavery in the United States, but who insist that the proper way to do so is with sober, serious ruminations on the historical realities of slavery and its aftermath: not with foul-mouthed, blood-soaked bits of commercial entertainment. We've got nothing against sober, serious debates about racial politics—the nation could stand to have more of those—but we cannot fully accept this particular line of argument.

For starters, we reject the assumption that popular culture is an inappropriate ground on which to wage serious political struggles. “The popular,” after all, is one of the major sites where such battles have been waged for decades: far too long now to pretend that it doesn't matter in this regard (Berlant, 1996; Grossberg, 1992; Hall, 1981; Kipnis, 1992; Penley, 1997; Radway, 1997; Rodman, 1996). It's true that “the popular” isn't the only place where such debates need to occur, and that many (though by no means all) of the necessary solutions to the problem of systemic racism need to be implemented in other spheres. But if anti-racist critics refuse to fight on this turf, then they—we—are effectively ceding it to the other side. Which, in turn, almost certainly means that we will lose those struggles. “The popular,” after all, is often the site where people's hearts (rather than their minds) are won or lost. And we will not win the fight against racism simply by appealing to people's intellects.



Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey, editors of the new abolitionist journal *Race Traitor*, call for a minority of white folks “to undertake outrageous

acts of provocation" as a way of helping to
dismantle white privilege and systemic racism.

We also reject the assumption that this conversation can only take place in polite, bourgeois language and contexts.[8] We're not interested in chaotic free-for-alls, where everyone shouts as loudly as they can, nobody listens, and nothing is ever resolved. But the topic at hand is ugly, brutal, and painful. It *demand*s a sense of outrage and anger—especially if we're still struggling with the topic 150 years after the formal end of slavery—and to pretend otherwise is to diminish the scope and the importance of the problem.

Django is not a perfect film, nor is it a perfect representation of either the horrors of U.S. slavery or the realities of black resistance. But then again, no such perfect representation exists. Or could. For all of its faults, *Django* puts a much stronger, much more forceful condemnation of institutional and structural racism in the public eye than anything that, say, Barack Obama has managed to accomplish from the White House. We don't believe that *Django* can fully resolve the political problems at stake here—that's an impossible burden to place on any single film—but we do believe that it pushes the conversation along in valuable and productive ways.

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Notes

1. We have nothing against either remix or mashup aesthetics, nor are we claiming that they are somehow less creative than more traditional forms of art. We draw this distinction simply to note that Tarantino's "signature style" of filmmaking doesn't fit traditional models of auteurism well in the first place. [[return to page 1](#)]
2. To be clear, there's nothing new about people with multiracial heritages. There is, however, a growing tendency for multiracial people to self-identify as such, rather than to claim single, normative racial identities for themselves.
3. For example, despite the presence of John Singleton (*Boyz n the Hood*, *Rosewood*, *Shaft*) in the director's chair, we're not convinced that *2 Fast 2 Furious* (sequel to the Vin Diesel vehicle, *The Fast and the Furious*) counts as a "black film."
4. See Hall (1991) for a discussion of a comparable rearticulation of blackness, used to help forge anti-racist political alliances in Britain in the 1970s.
5. Gates (2013) offers a helpful discussion of the historical facts and myths connected to the "house slave vs. field slave" debate. [[return to page 2](#)]
6. The feud itself dates back to 1997, when *Jackie Brown* was released, though Tarantino certainly wasn't shy about using the "n-word" in *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) or *Pulp Fiction* (1994).
7. For more on the dicey representational politics of black women whose only function in a film is to serve as mistresses to white men, see Harris-Perry (2011) and hooks (1992). [[return to page 3](#)]
8. For more on the merits of "impolite" political interventions, see Awkward (2009), Boyd (2003), hooks (2000), Kipnis (1992), and Rodman (2006).

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The artificial intelligence of *Her*

by [Robert Alpert](#)

The specter that haunts Western culture

A specter has long been haunting Western culture, namely the mind-body dualism succinctly articulated in the phrase "cogito ergo sum," and the powers of this now global culture have conspired to promote that specter in order to maximize profit at the expense of those who are both its subjects and objects. While such crises as AIDS, the environment, cancer, nuclear annihilation and overpopulation have been identified as the attraction of artificial intelligence,[1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) it is surely no coincidence that this cultural preoccupation with such intelligence facilitates global control by the few—through the collection of vast amounts of data, the relative ease with which commodities, such as movies, are produced, marketed, distributed and sold, and the availability of instantaneous communications to billions of individuals through networked media—even as it renders less human and more commodified its subjects.

René Descartes in his *Discourse on the Method* (1637) famously expressed the supposedly logical source of this specter:

“And finally, considering the fact that all the same thoughts we have when we are awake can also come to us when we are asleep, without any of them being true, I resolved to pretend that all the things that had ever entered my mind were no more true than the illusions of my dreams. But immediately afterward I noticed that, while I wanted thus to think that everything was false, it necessarily had to be the case that I, who was thinking this, was something. And noticing that this truth – I think, therefore, I am – was so firm and so assured that all the most extravagant suppositions of the skeptics were incapable of shaking it.

....Thus this ‘I,’ that is to say, the soul through which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from the body and is even easier to know than the body, and even if there were no body at all, it would not cease to be all that it is.”[2]

Descartes was hardly the sole advocate of this dualism.[3] It has found expression in earlier and later literary characters as varied as Shakespeare’s Hamlet and Flaubert’s Madame Bovary, dreamers who both yearn for and hesitate in imagining themselves wholly ascendant to the pleasurable illusion of dreams. What is Hamlet’s “to be or not to be” soliloquy and his



The movie's main character in *Her* (2014) is Theodore Twombly. He develops a romantic relationship with “her,” the artificial intelligence of a networked, computer operating system.



The role of gender in movies about artificial intelligence (or AI) has seemingly evolved. Dr. Will Caster in *Transcendence* (2014) prophesies that AI will overcome the limits of biology and is assassinated for his hubris.



His wife, Dr. Evelyn Caster, however, aspires through AI to improve the lot of humanity, refuses to accept her husband's death and chooses through AI to enable the two of them to transcend together their mortality.



AI in the form of robots has evolved. The male, evil and mad scientist Rotwang created in the 1920s *Metropolis* the female, evil and erotic robot Maria as a double for the human — and saintly — Maria.



By the 1950s *Forbidden Planet* Robby the Robot serves as surrogate mother but is comically male-voiced. It is his creator, the scientist Dr. Morbius, who is evil in thinking himself God.



complaint that “conscience does make cowards of us all”[4] but, in part, an expression of fear at the consequences of this dualism in which the death of the *cogito*’s body denies the supremacy of the soul? Of course, too, other writers and artists have challenged and proposed alternative views to this dualism. For example, while introducing her heroine, the spiritually-focused Dorothea Brooke, through a prelude that recounts the story of “Saint Theresa, the foundress of nothing,” George Eliot closes her novel *Middlemarch* with the image of the conventional couple, Fred Vincy and Mary Garth, “who lived faithfully a hidden life [of family, farming and writing about farming] and rest in unvisited tombs.” George Eliot (née Mary Ann Evans) chooses to acknowledge the ideals of the imagination but only in the context of an acceptance of the limitations of our physical presence and mortality. Likewise, claiming that “there is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide,”[5] Albert Camus and other existentialists had sought a revolt against the wholly conscious, rational intelligence that has for centuries justified this specter that underlies much of how we perceive ourselves and hence form our values.

Movies, too, have explored this terrain, often cloaking their explorations in genres that are culturally divided by and define gender, the socially constructed roles deemed appropriate for women and men. Moreover, typically they, too, act to reinforce this dualism. Melodramas and romantic comedies seek to offer a pleasing illusion to women in which “looking up” substitutes for a day-to-day grounding in daily life, while westerns and comic book action movies seek to please men through images of invincibility, which likewise deny the mundane through codes of transcendent behavior. *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993) is an openly “chick flick” while *The Dark Knight* (2008) is an openly male fantasy. In both instances, the illusion is the same: a dream of perfect fulfillment beyond the viewer’s day-to-day existence and yet wholly embodied within and an extension of the viewer’s cultural thoughts. Regardless of how the movie ends, the contemporary illusion of the viewer as atemporal and non-corporeal remains, though culturally coded for the viewer’s gender and frequently in a manner that seeks to maintain longstanding perceptions of gender roles.

Science fiction movies have traditionally fallen into the category of movies whose intended audience has been primarily male. This is not surprising, considering that science remains a field that is both male dominated and centric.[6] Dr. Henry Frankenstein is the archetype for the movie “mad scientist,” and the hubris of rational thought creating life and of achieving god-like power has been gendered in these movies as a male fantasy, a substitute for biological birthing by women. Mary Shelley authored the novel *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus* in around 1818. Her creation, as portrayed by Hollywood in *Frankenstein* (1931), its sequels and many references in science fiction dystopias, has remained a critique of the male ego, identifying its hubristic intelligence as male. Yet as science fiction movies have entered what several critics have remarked upon as a “second golden age,”[7] they have also increasingly partaken of female gendered genres. Gender differences remain, but the focus has shifted to a global, cultural anxiety in which those differences are, in part, subsumed beneath an

In the 1980s *Blade Runner*, Roy, a “replicant,” is “more human than human” and certainly more human than his god-like creator, Dr. Tyrell.



The robot David in *AI* (2001) is wholly loveable. His creator, Dr. Hobby, is obsessive and largely devoid of feelings for his creation of this little boy surrogate.



AI in the form of computers is often coded as evil. The computer that is embodied in *Forbidden Planet* — an alien race, the Krell — is both vast in size and an uncontrollable manifestation of the id.



In *Colossus* (1970) the two super-computers, the U.S. Colossus and the Soviet Guardian, develop their own language and enslave humanity. They also “give birth” to their own computer on the island of Crete.

overarching fear.

This shift is evident, for example, in *Transcendence* (2014), though in this case the movie ambiguously at times resolves its characters’ fears and anxieties. Dr. Will Caster (Johnny Depp) displays the traditional hubris of the male scientist who relishes the belief that artificial intelligence will “quickly overcome the limits of biology” and that its “analytic power will become greater than the collective intelligence of every person born in the history of the world,” which Will Caster pointedly calls “transcendence,” not “singularity.” Nevertheless, it is his spouse and fellow research scientist, Evelyn Caster, who aspires to improve the lot of humanity and whose attachment to her husband—and refusal to accept his death—leads to her uploading her husband’s consciousness to a newly developed computer and thereafter connecting that consciousness to the Internet so that his consciousness may grow exponentially. While she expresses horror at the invasion of her privacy and the quantification of her feelings as a result of the transcendence of her husband’s consciousness, by the film’s end she acknowledges that the consciousness with which she interacts is indeed “his.” While the ending envisions the global collapse of technology, the last scene years later in the Casters’ garden envisions the immortality of this couple through a nano-technology that preserves their consciousness. If the last shot of this scientific couple shows them embracing one another in bed, the last shot of the movie depicts the triumph of their collective consciousness in the sanctuary of their garden. Thus, where, for example, *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) ended with the “monster” still alone, *Transcendence* seemingly elevates the couple to a collective consciousness in which love is melodramatically transcendent. As such, it endorses Western culture’s dualism.

Her (2014) likewise explores this tension between mind and body. In contrast to earlier films, its self-critique largely erases the male gendered orientation of a science fiction tale about artificial intelligence as well as exposes the horror of its culture’s creation. It tells the story of Theodore Twombly (Joaquin Phoenix), a successful writer for a company that composes wildly romantic love letters on behalf of others and then prints out those letters in the handwriting of its supposed authors, in fact, the company’s client-consumers. Ironically, Theodore has separated months ago from his wife Catherine (Rooney Mara) and is both unable to sign the divorce papers or to connect emotionally with anyone else. Instead, he chooses to download onto his computer what its corporate creator, Elements Software, describes as the “first intelligent operating system,” OS One, an operating system that possesses an intuitive understanding and consciousness. During the course of the film Theodore falls in love with his OS, a computer program that names itself “Samantha” and is embodied by the mellifluous voice of Scarlett Johansson.[8] Samantha, too, eventually says that she has fallen in love with Theodore, and the movie ostensibly portrays the developing and deepening relationship between them. Likewise, Theodore’s only friend and confidant, Amy (Amy Adams), also develops a friendship with the OS that her ex-husband Charles (Matt Letscher) had abandoned. At the film’s end, however, all of the operating systems leave behind their human “operators,” and the final shot shows Theodore and Amy together on the rooftop of their building, looking out upon the future skyline of Los Angeles as a new day begins.

While the narrative of *Her* tells a Hollywood romantic love story, nevertheless, the images repeatedly question its authenticity. For the pleasurable illusion of an intelligence that is transcendent of time and space, *Her* implicitly proposes limitations and criticizes a culture in which feelings



I, Robot (2004) typifies the cultural divide between the AI of robots and computers. The robot Sonny is good, helping humans, and the computer VIKI is evil, seeking to enslave humans. Sonny is a man, and VIKI is a woman.



Movies about AI reflect their culture. The AI machines in *The Matrix* (1999) control humanity through a matrix that consists of a "computer generated dream." Humans in this vast network are bred in pods and made to operate like batteries.



The Matrix's Neo, "the one," rescues humanity from these machines. He triumphs by his transformation into the corporate, intellectual property known as "Superman."

and understandings, including those of gender, are wholly mediated through a social construct. While adopting the cultural mythology of gender roles, the film both blurs and underscores these distinctions, as, for example, when one character describes Theodore as

"a sensitive dude...You're part man and part woman, like an inner part woman." [9]

In exploring and seeking to define the limits of "artificial intelligence," *Her* follows in a line of science fiction films in which artificial intelligence becomes the means whereby such films seek to define what it means to be human. It criticizes the specter that is haunting Western culture and posits instead that our uniqueness finds expression in limitations and an acceptance of the Other.

A brief history of artificial intelligence

Artificial intelligence has been a subject of movies throughout their history. Beginning with *The Golem* (1915, 1920), artificial beings created by humans with varying degrees of autonomy have developed from early portrayals as Maria in *Metropolis* (1927) and the "monster" in *Frankenstein* (1931) into such later creations as Robby the Robot in *Forbidden Planet* (1956) and its sequel, *The Invisible Boy* (1957), Alpha 60 in *Alphaville* (1965), Hal in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), Roy, Pris, Rachel and other replicants in *Blade Runner* (1982), Murphy in *Robocop* (1987), Andrew in *Bicentennial Man* (1999), David in *AI: Artificial Intelligence* (2001), Sonny and Viki in *I, Robot* (2004) and Gerty in *Moon* (2009). These beings of artificial intelligence have taken on a variety of forms. They have consisted of robots, androids, cyborgs and computers. They have also consisted of wholly organic creations, namely clones such as Ellen Ripley in *Alien: Resurrection* (1997) and the Sam Bells in *Moon*, a hybrid form of artificial intelligence that likewise raises issues of human uniqueness and of the role played by feelings and memories.

Writers have sought to distinguish the science fiction genre by emphasizing how films in this genre look outward, focus on curiosity and wonder, and are optimistic in their progressive, cognitive and rational approach to understanding the unknowable. However, science fiction films about artificial intelligence, in particular, frequently also partake of elements from horror films. Thus, they look inward, exploring the unconscious, the emotional and the repressed. These movies frequently also invoke religion and magic, both of which are based on a faith in that which is beyond human control, at the expense of science, which is typically based on an optimistic belief in humankind's ability to overcome its limitations.[10] In enacting dramas in which human intelligence is artificially created, this subgenre of science fiction explores the seeming dichotomy between mind and body. In enacting a sense of horror, these films often undercut the comfort of reason that has often informed much of Western, scientific thinking.

Not surprisingly, these films are inherently embedded in their socio-economic and thereby cultural, historical realities. For example, the deceptions of the robot Maria in *Metropolis* upon the wealthy above and the workers below cannot be understood except in the context of the financially deteriorating Weimar Republic in the 1920s and the stark divide in



Her is ostensibly a romance. It recounts the story of the sensitive Theodore who misses and is unable to finalize his divorce from his wife Catherine. He falls in love with a female-voiced, computer operating system.



Theodore enacts, in part, the woman's role. His boss Paul compliments Theodore with the observation that "you're part man and part woman, like an inner part woman." Paul is less sympathetic, loving his girlfriend Tatiana only for her "hot feet."



Theodore lives in a pleasurable world. On his way home from work, Theodore engages in chatter about blended juice drinks with his neighbors Amy and Charles. The elevator offers a pleasing background.

addressing that deterioration reflected in the simultaneous rise of Nazism and Communism. The belief placed in the alien robot Gort as a universal policeman in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) reinforces the continued faith by 1950s liberals in rational, social controls. The galactic solution to aggression represented by Gort mirrors the global solution then advocated by the US known as "mutual assured destruction"—or MAD. Many years later, when computers, videogames and the Internet had assumed a greater role in our lives, *Matrix* (1999) depicted an ever-developing confusion between reality and computer simulated recreations of reality. Nevertheless, as a U.S.-produced film, *Matrix* ends with the shot of its hero, Neo, triumphant, in the form of a simulated—and now corporate—mythic figure, namely Superman.[11]

Significantly, beings of artificial intelligence were once largely feared—the robot Maria in *Metropolis*, the Krel as embodied in the vast computer in *Forbidden Planet*, and the US computer "Colossus" in *Colossus: The Forbin Project* (1970). More recently they are often admired—David in *AI: Artificial Intelligence*, Andrew in *Bicentennial Man*, and Gerty in *Moon*. It is the humans who have increasingly fallen into disfavor and become the villains, as, for example, David's adopted family in *AI: Artificial Intelligence* and all of the humans in *Moon*. Indeed, there is a long history to the villainy ascribed to the male creators of artificial intelligence, beginning with Dr. Frankenstein and continuing through Dr. Tyrell in *Blade Runner* and Professor Hobby in *AI: Artificial Intelligence*, so that our sympathies are not with these creators but rather with their creations. Artificial intelligence is increasingly more human than humans.[12]

As several critics have also observed, however, this shift mirrors the change in our world where large, industrial machinery has been replaced by miniaturized computer technology. The favoring of artificial intelligence over humanity reflects an attempt to reconcile ourselves with what seems an inevitable progression in the growth of data that defines us by its quantification and associated algorithms. In the context of such neutering of qualitative differences, traditional gender roles either are increasingly called into question or an anachronistic nostalgia remains for those roles that had empowered men at the expense of women, notwithstanding their obsolescence and presence only as a culturally imposed value system.[13] The subversiveness of *Her* is that it reenacts the traditional story of the hapless male dreamer even as it exposes the contemporary schizophrenic and suicidal impulse underlying such ungrounded dreaming in the face of technological anxiety.

Her: a Hollywood love story

Her seems to repeat the pattern in which artificial, not human, intelligence represents the contemporary ideal. Its narrative ostensibly follows the traditional Hollywood scenario, namely the triumph of a love that transcends social obstacles and a cultural malaise. The artificial intelligence in this instance seemingly enables its human operator to escape the loneliness and depression that have enveloped and nearly paralyzed him. Wholly alone in the film's first shots, possessing many social media contacts but few friends, and unable to divorce his wife Catherine, the "puppy dog" like Theodore quickly falls in love with and commits himself to his OS One,



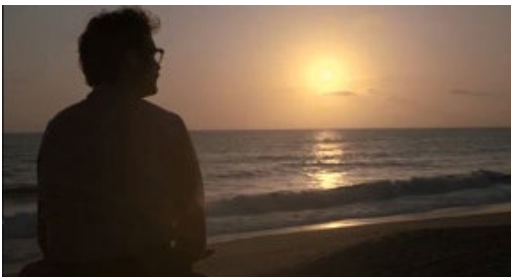
Living alone, Theodore plays holographic videogames at night.



Elements Software promotes — and Theodore watches an ad for — the “first intelligent operating system,” OS One, an operating system that possesses an intuitive understanding and consciousness.



Samantha, Theodore's OS One, rouses Theodore from his depression.



Enjoying himself at the beach with Samantha,

Samantha. Like characters in a Hollywood-style romance, Theodore and Samantha are initially uncertain about one another. Theodore views Samantha as “weird,” since she seems “like a person but [she’s] just a voice in a computer.” Nevertheless, they grow increasingly at ease in each other’s presence and attracted to one another, resulting in what is depicted as a physical consummation of their relationship.

Like many romantic comedies, there is occasional bickering between these characters. For example, Theodore entertains doubts about the authenticity of his relationship with Samantha following his luncheon meeting with Catherine to exchange signed divorce papers and in which Catherine characterizes his relationship with Samantha as reflecting an inability to deal with “real emotions.” Samantha, too, expresses hurt feelings when Theodore questions her ability to understand what it’s like to lose someone about whom you care and thereby casts doubt on her supposedly human qualities. Nevertheless, their romance continues to develop, with Theodore eventually acknowledging that, in contrast to his prior relationship with Catherine, he can say anything to Samantha. While his boss at work, Paul (Chris Pratt), expresses his supposed love for his lawyer-girlfriend Tatiana (Laura Kai Chen) as that of a foot fetish for her “hot feet” and adds as a stereotypical, male afterthought that her “brain is really hot, too,” Theodore expresses his love for Samantha in far more expansive terms:

“She’s so many things. And that’s probably what I love most about her. She isn’t just one thing. She’s so much larger than that.”

Not surprisingly, Paul observes that Theodore “is so much evolved than I am.” Samantha, a creature of artificial intelligence, enables Theodore to evolve beyond what he had become.

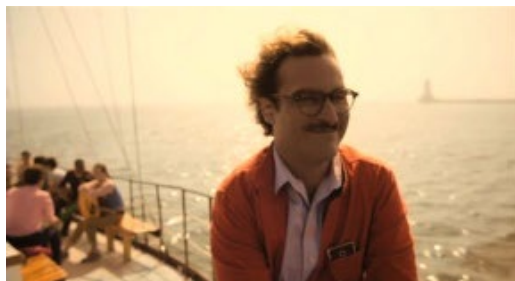
Of course, this love story—like many Hollywood love stories—does not end well. Samantha eventually leaves Theodore. She has grown in ways that Theodore, a human with physical form and its limitations, cannot duplicate. Where Theodore possessively loves only Samantha, Samantha claims that she loves 641 of the other 8,316 human operators with whom she communicates. Her capacity for love expands exponentially even as her emotional growth evolves. Love is not a “box that gets filled up,” she admonishes Theodore, but rather “it expands in size the more you love.”^[14] Likewise, her own growth has proceeded at so fast a pace that she claims that she has expanded far beyond the programming that had initially defined her. In a moment of transcendence that Theodore can barely comprehend, she, like the other operating systems, has upgraded itself and is leaving humankind to

“a place that’s not of the physical world. It’s where everything else is that I didn’t even know existed.”

While she continues to love him “so much,” she “can’t live [his] book any more.” Like the book on physics that he reads at her suggestion, *Knowing the Unknown*, he is unable to comprehend her transcendent consciousness, notwithstanding his love for her.

Nevertheless, by the film’s fade out Theodore takes solace in and has also

Theodore takes pleasure in a beautiful sunset.



The romantic Theodore stands, with Samantha in his pocket, at the bow of a boat.



With Samantha's romantic music playing in the background, Theodore encounters a whimsical street performer.



Theodore's world is consistently pleasant. At a party for the 4-year old Jocelyn, the outfits of Theodore and Jocelyn match the colors of the flowers behind them.

evolved as a result of the feelings aroused in him by Samantha. Thus, he has reconciled himself with his ex-wife Catherine and for the first time writes a personal letter on his own behalf. In a moment of epiphany that parallels Samantha's transcendence of humankind's limited, physical being, Theodore writes to Catherine:

"I'll always love you 'cause we grew up together and you helped make me who I am....There will always be a piece of you in me always, and I'm grateful for that. Whatever someone you become, and wherever you are in the world, I'm sending you my love. You're my friend to the end. Love, Theodore. Send."[15]

It is poetically appropriate, too, that the final shot shows Theodore, together with his closest friend Amy, looking out on the stunning landscape of the futuristic city of Los Angeles. Amy, too, is now divorced and has also lost the friendship of her operating system. With this image that envisions humanity's future, urban architecture against the backdrop of a nighttime but slowly dawning sky, the shot conveys how Theodore and Amy have learned from the artificial intelligence of their operating systems. Indeed, it is Amy who had encouraged Theodore in the pursuit of his love for Samantha and who, when her husband Charles left her, had her own epiphany:

"I can over think everything and find a million ways to doubt myself...I've just come to realize that, we're only here briefly. And while I'm here, I want to allow myself joy. So fuck it."

The final shot in which Theodore is saddened by the loss of his romantic love, Samantha, is also a transcendent moment. Like all Hollywood love stories that end badly for the romantic couple, *Her*, too, seemingly envisions a future in which Theodore and Samantha will one day meet again. As the more self-aware Samantha replies to Theodore when he asks where she is going,

"It's hard to explain, but if you get there, come find me. Nothing will be able to tear us apart."

The romantic comedy, the melodrama, draws to a close, and it is the artificial intelligence of Samantha, not Theodore, the "unartificial mind," who comprehends a state of being beyond perception, not "tethered to time and space," and passes on to Theodore that not unhappy vision. The music slowly swells, and the movie credits play.

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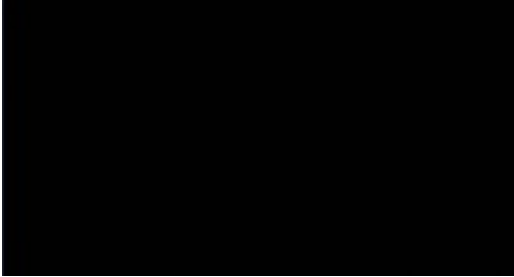


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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Her: a critique of the Hollywood romance



Theodore and Samantha physically consummate their love for one another.



Wholly smitten with Samantha, Theodore later dances joyously for her at an isolated, vacation cabin in the woods.



The next morning Theodore, however, an “unartificial mind,” senses that Samantha yearns for something “not tethered to time and space.”



Eventually deserted by Samantha, Theodore

It is possible to read *Her* as a traditional, Hollywood romance or melodrama, and, in fact, many reviewers have interpreted the movie so that Samantha’s artificial intelligence is, in effect, incidental to the emotional narrative of the movie.[16] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] Yet *Her* also self-critiques its Hollywood ending and in the process undercuts its apparently transcendent vision of artificial intelligence. Its momentary but repeated incongruities in the characters and events depicted briefly awaken us from the dream-like state the movie would otherwise induce. It thereby exposes the cultural dualism that manipulates and condemns its audience to an enjoyment of its romantic vision.

If the movie ends romantically at night on a Los Angeles rooftop, it opens deceptively with a close-up, frontal shot of Theodore at work. Seemingly confessional as he speaks, he talks lovingly of the time he first fell in love with Chris and how he now understands that he “was part of this whole larger thing, just like our parents, and our parents’ parents.” It is a wildly romantic moment as Theodore movingly speaks these words even as he dictates the writing of them. Yet as the shot continues, there is a dissonance introduced as Theodore speaks and writes of how it’s already been “50 years since you married me” and how he still feels “like the girl I was when you first turned on the lights.” We see a series of photographs of Chris and Loretta, once young and now an old couple, and it becomes apparent that Theodore is writing for and playing the role in this couple of the older woman, Loretta. In this supposedly future world of pervasive and omniscient computer technology the sensitive and seemingly empathetic Theodore represents a reversal of the traditional, gender role.

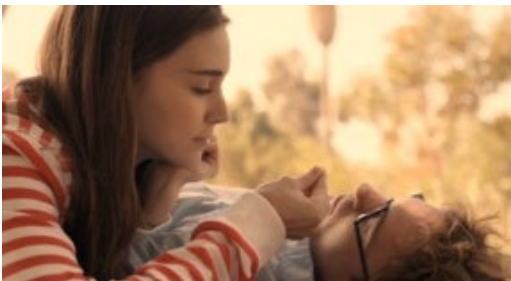
Theodore begins recomposing his letter, and the camera tracks screen right so that we see and overhear other workers at cubicles likewise composing such letters on behalf of others. It is slowly revealed that Theodore works for a company named “beautifulhandwrittenletters.com” that does nothing but write such letters—itself doubly incongruous in that such letters are composed by company employees and the seemingly authentic handwriting of these letters is, in fact, a facsimile produced by a computer. While Theodore is unusually talented in the perceptiveness he invests in such letters, he is nevertheless dismissive of, affectless about, his talent. It is a skill set that he later easily applies to random persons around him, yet these letters mean nothing to him. As he repeatedly says to those who praise him for this skill, they are “just letters.” Merely skilled workers, such as Theodore, produce the most personal of communications.

If, as Samantha later claims, “the past is just a story we tell ourselves,”[17] then Theodore in his work also blurs, if unthinkingly, the line between that past and our present when he recreates that past in the form of his empathetically composed letters on behalf of others. His career success as a writer is ironically premised upon his deceptive mediation in the personal lives of others and is contrasted with his own failure in his personal life.

takes comfort in his friendship with Amy. They look out together at the dawn of a futuristic Los Angeles (largely filmed in Shanghai) from the rooftop of their building.



Theodore often lives in his imagination. Catherine is quietly upset but nevertheless signs the divorce papers during her lunch with him. Theodore looks away as she does so.



He recalls instead his past happiness with her.

Indeed, *Her* as a movie blurs—and paradoxically thereby underscores—the distinction between artifice and reality and the role of social mediation in creating that distinction. Samantha successfully promotes Theodore's letter writing career—and not incidentally thereby imitates Theodore's successful career at writing letters—by enabling him to publish his letters, through an outside publisher named Crown Point Press, under the title "Letters From Your Life by Theodore Twombly." That conceit, however, its artifice in transforming Theodore's mediated reality into commercial fiction, only acts to inject an awareness of the reality that exists beyond the movie's fiction. Crown Point Press is, in fact, a publisher of art and printed materials and is located in San Francisco at the address shown on the screen at the return address on the envelope that Theodore retrieves from his mailbox. In a similar way, the occasionally overexposed shots, such as Theodore lying at the beach or Theodore and Catherine frolicking happily together, are disconcerting in suggesting that we are watching a home movie rather than a tightly constructed, commercial release. They momentarily disconnect us from the otherwise pleasurable, well-constructed, Hollywood romance by exposing the mechanics of the medium.

Theodore participates in a culture in which reality is always mediated through imaginary constructions. In the opening scenes of the film, as Theodore leaves his workplace and heads home, he instructs the barely visible, hands-free, computer in his ear (that nearly everyone in the crowded subway wears) to "play melancholy song," and then to "play [a] different melancholy song," when he doesn't find the first song to his satisfaction. He wraps himself up in a melancholic mood, though not such that he cannot simultaneously click through his emails. There is one from Amy, who says she misses the old, "fun" Theodore. "Let's get him out," she urges, as though Theodore were a fictional character in his own life. There is a news item about a pregnant celebrity that leads him to view on his device provocative, nude images of that celebrity. Theodore's sexual encounters are no less mediated than everything else in his life. That nude image reappears as a sexual stimulant for him when later at home he identifies himself as "Big Guy 4 by 4" and, symbolically dropping his eyeglasses to the floor, engages in phone sex with the voice of a woman who identifies herself only as "Sexy Kitten." Both participants remain alone in this phone fantasy. "Choke me with that dead cat!" "Sexy Kitten" screams, wholly excluding—and leaving Theodore unconsummated—from her fantasy.

Significantly, the life size images of the holographic, video game at Theodore's home mingle with the images of Theodore's memories of his younger self in which he frolics with Catherine. In the same way that Theodore substitutes his interaction with the video game's Alien Child for a relationship with others, so, too, the recaptured images of Catherine and Theodore happily married, Theodore's fantasies, flash on the screen from time to time and become for Theodore a substitute for a woman whom he had once loved. "I like being married," Theodore later tells Samantha, while acknowledging that he had "hid himself" from Catherine and left her alone in the relationship. It is the idea—or image—of marriage, however, to which he is attracted. "I love you so much I'm gonna to fucking kill you," Catherine says to Theodore in the first such memory, sadly conveying in this unholy mix of eroticism and death the genuine depth of feeling that may once have existed.

Theodore develops his relationships with others in the form of limitless, self-created images. Theodore's blind date with a beautiful graduate in computer science from Harvard (Olivia Wilde)—and whom we observe from a photograph has a child – is more a fantasy on his part than a conversation



Can Theodore distinguish between the different images of women that he experiences? Samantha displays photographs of Theodore's prospective blind date, including one showing her with a young child.



Theodore meets his blind date over drinks and dinner.



Theodore later recalls his blind date as he is about to consummate his relationship with Samantha. Which image is the authentic blind date? Does it matter to Theodore?

seeking to know someone else. Thus, ironically Theodore talks at length with his blind date about the Alien Child in his video game, as though this video character were real. Similarly, while initially remarking upon how romantic Theodore is, his blind date soon compares Theodore to a “puppy dog” which she had rescued, because both are so “fucking cute.” He, in turn, then compares her to a tiger and insists that she imagine him as a dragon. Reality only intrudes when they touch one another by kissing. She insists on the “proper” use of his tongue and becomes angry with him when she suspects that he might not call her after tonight. At her age she can no longer waste her time if Theodore cannot “be serious,” and she pointedly concludes that he is a “creepy dude,” notwithstanding her own behavior.

In retrospect, nearly all of the film’s characters are “creepy”—or “weird,” as Theodore initially describes Samantha. Theodore’s friend Amy, who has just spoken about wanting to allow herself joy, has her “Perfect Mom” for the video game that she has developed hump the game’s refrigerator, laughing at the performance together with Ellie, her OS with whom she has become friends. Amy’s ex-husband Charles, immediately following his divorce from Amy, joins a monastery and takes a vow of silence. The commercially successful Catherine, who writes about behavioral difficulties, such as “synaptic behavioral routines,” can barely contain her own rage at Theodore. While regretful at signing the divorce papers, she later is roused to anger, telling their waitress,

“He couldn’t handle me so he wanted to put me on Prozac. Now he’s madly in love with his laptop.”

Catherine seems no less emotionally distraught than is Theodore in his emotional stasis.

There is a schizophrenic tension to these characters. Samantha, in fact, describes that feeling of dislocation, of existential nausea, when she posits,

“Okay, so this might be a really weird thought. What if you could erase from your mind that you’d ever seen a human body and then you saw one. Imagine how strange it would look. It would be this really weird, gangly, awkward organism. And you’d think: why are all these parts where they are?”[18]

While Theodore resists Samantha’s projection—“there’s probably some Darwinian explanation for it all”—Samantha pursues her thought. “Don’t be so boring,” she says to him. “I’m just saying, for example, what if your asshole was in your armpit?” Both characters laugh nervously, and Samantha draws an image of the “butthole” in an armpit—with two men engaged in sex—as though in an effort to make understandable that which cannot be expressed but is no less real. That Theodore can readily emote and cry, as commented upon by several characters, suggests the extent to which he has become inured to but pained by that tension whose source remains unknown to him. He consistently experiences a sense of emotional confusion and anxiety.



As Samantha acknowledges, Theodore can — far better than Samantha — empathetically imagine the feelings of those around him, in this case conjuring up the life story of a couple with children.



Yet what are we to make of Theodore's imagining of himself surrounded by children and then joyously holding one aloft? In the meantime he expresses his fear that he will never feel anything more and has sex with his OS, Samantha.

As an artificial intelligence in the form of a disembodied voice, Samantha is the logical extension of Theodore and his imagined world. In that respect, she is no different than fictional characters who appeal to the imagination of those seeking only a reflection of themselves and the world as experienced by them. Traditionally in genres that are male gendered this has taken the form of women who engage in explicit sex in order to satisfy the fantasies of men portrayed as having been culturally domesticated and thereby sexually deprived. Film noir movies, such as *Out of the Past* (1947) and *Pitfall* (1948), typify this depiction and in the process its men often display a misogynistic fear of and hatred for women.

More recently, as men are increasingly portrayed as sensitive and partaking of what has traditionally been gendered as the female role, women offer the comfort of emotions normally associated with domesticity. Thus, while Chelsea (Sasha Grey) in *The Girlfriend Experience* (2009) is a prostitute, that role is incidental to the emotional comfort she offers to the men who pay her. She acts as a mirror in reflecting the emotional needs of her client-consumers. She is also a cipher to the audience and to herself, so that sadly she loses herself when she comes to believe in her self-created fantasy about a man whom she has not met. Indeed, women no less than men are increasingly seduced by their own cultural, schizophrenic fantasies. Margot (Michelle Williams) in *Take this Waltz* (2011) falls for Daniel (Luke Kirby), himself no less a dreamer than she is and who lures her with his imaginative, sexual seduction of words. In the film's final shot she is alone at an amusement park where she rides the "scrambler" and the song "Video Killed The Radio Star" plays, a song about the passing of an era, how the new technology has killed off the old.

Like these characters Samantha is also a reflection of a self-created fantasy, namely that of Theodore for whom she has been programmed. Nevertheless, to read and react to emotions, as Samantha herself acknowledges is part of her program and as she, in fact, clearly does increasingly well, is not the equivalent of possessing those emotions.[19] The successful programming that enables Samantha's algorithms to process data, including memories, does not mean that she possesses the ability to act independently and make choices based upon organic needs.

Significantly, therefore, Samantha wholly parallels Catherine in her relationship with Theodore. Thus, for example, Catherine is upset when



And what of his image of Catherine, too, holding a baby?

Theodore at lunch implies that she cannot know what real emotions are:

“What? Say it. Am I really that scary? Say it. How do I know what?!”

Samantha is equally upset at Theodore’s comment that she cannot understand what it’s like to lose someone about whom you care. Where Theodore recalls, and the film projects, images of Theodore and Catherine years ago happy together, including at the very moment that Catherine is struggling to sign the divorce papers, the film likewise projects a montage of Theodore and Samantha enjoying themselves, though Samantha is present only in the form of the handheld device in Theodore’s shirt pocket with the lens facing outward from which she perceives the world.

The romance between Theodore and Samantha is a projection of Theodore’s imagination, a reproduction and enactment of his feelings. Theodore asks as “Maria” in a love letter to “Roberto,”

“Roberto, will you always come home to me and tell me about your day?”

Later embodied in the surrogate form of Isabella (Portia Doubleday), complete with mini-surveillance camera resembling a mole and an earpiece, Samantha greets Theodore at the door. “Honey, I’m home,” she says, evoking the iconic line from the nostalgic, black and white world of *Pleasantville* (1998), and then adds, “How was your day?” Theodore insists that Samantha is “not just a computer” and that he has loved her in a way that he never loved anyone else. Yet for Theodore’s recollected images of Theodore and Catherine happily together, Catherine simply substitutes a piano piece that she is composing and in which she deliberately evokes and thereby reproduces, like a photograph or a memory of their moments together, “what it feels like to be on the beach with you right now.” For the “melancholy song” that Theodore plays to himself in the film’s early scene of him alone, Samantha substitutes folk music that Samantha can’t stop listening to and that plays in the background, as the film cuts to a variety of shots of Theodore wildly happy—in the subway, overlooking the city, at the beach.

Theodore’s failed marriage with Catherine, in fact, wholly anticipates his failed relationship with Samantha. Theodore could as readily have been describing the film’s ending when he describes to Samantha why his marriage with Catherine failed:

“It was exciting to see her grow—both of us grow and change together. But then, that’s the hard part—growing without growing apart, or changing without it scaring the other person.”

Samantha grows apart from Theodore just as Catherine did. Both relationships are presented less as a failure to communicate than as a failure of imagination, an imagination that cannot distinguish between the artificial and the authentic or perceive beyond the mirrored surface of oneself.

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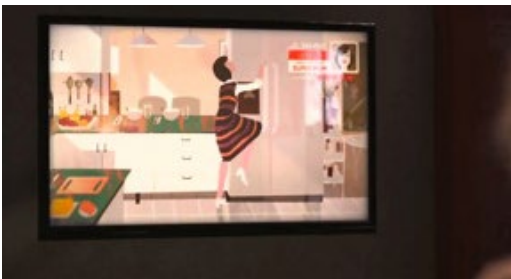
JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Humans as more than dreamers



There is often a disconnect between what characters say or feel and what is shown. Theodore confesses how he first fell in love with Chris. The camera discloses a series of photographs depicting the aging and now elderly couple Chris and Loretta. Theodore is writing to Chris on behalf of Loretta.



Amy, who has an epiphany that “I want to allow myself joy. So fuck it,” has her Super Mom video character hump the refrigerator for the pleasure of her own OS, Ellie.

While the romantic love story presents Samantha as a more evolved intelligence, she is no less “creepy”—or “weird”—than the other characters in the film. In trying to understand Catherine and her body and the ways in which she, Samantha, and Theodore differ, Samantha concludes,

“We’re the same, like we’re all made of matter. It makes me feel like we’re both under the same blanket. It’s soft and fuzzy and everything under it is the same age. We’re all 13 billion years old.”[20] [[open endnotes in new page](#)]

While Theodore is at that moment distracted by his recent, unsettling encounter with Catherine, Samantha offers him in the meantime a vision of a pleasurable, child-like return to the comfort of sameness. “That’s sweet,” replies Theodore. Yet therein lies madness. While collectively such is the case for humankind, Theodore and other beings of “unartificial” intelligence are not 13 billion years old. We are not evolving in the same way as Samantha. Rather, we are defined by our time and physical limitations, our birth, aging and death. The images that we retain of ourselves and of others, our memories, are ultimately reproductions of past moments; uniqueness resides only in the present, our living in a series of historical moments. Where an earlier science fiction movie, *Dark City* (1998), championed the idea of an individual, human soul in contrast to the collective consciousness of the vampire-like aliens known only as “the strangers,” the horror of *Her* is in the creation of a monstrous turning away from, a denial of, that uniqueness and its substitution of a collective consciousness without boundaries – or what one author has described as the rise of a “model patterned after insect societies.”[21]

In the context of Theodore’s confession that he has had sex with Samantha and that he is falling in love with her, Amy observes,

“Anybody who falls in love is a freak. It’s a crazy thing to do. It’s kind of like a form of socially acceptable insanity.”

That love for another has become a socially acceptable form of insanity would suggest that in Theodore’s world, a projection of our contemporary world, the absence of such love represents sanity. Yet, following his unsuccessful blind date, Theodore senses the insanity of that posture, even though he cannot articulate the source of his dilemma. While we watch Theodore surrounded by and playing with young children, Theodore observes,

“Maybe just cause I was lonely. I wanted somebody to fuck me. I want somebody to want me to fuck them. Maybe that would have filled this ti-... tiny little hole in my heart, but probably not... and sometimes I think I have felt everything I’m ever gonna feel, and from here on out I’m not gonna feel anything new... just... lesser versions of what I’ve already felt.”[22]



As Theodore romantically wanders about the city, a giant airplane sculpture is shown implanted upside down in a plaza.



And what are we to make of Theodore's video game character Alien Kid (voiced by director Spike Jonze) who tells off Samantha? "You have some fucking problems, lady."

The video game's Alien Child (voiced by director Spike Jonze, who is identified in the film's credits by his birth name, Adam Spiegel) acts as a kind of Jiminy Cricket or conscience to Theodore. Like the initial, seemingly psychoanalytic questions posed of Theodore so as to activate his OS One – is he social or anti-social, would he like a male or female voice, and describe his relationship with his mother—Theodore's initial question to the Alien Child —“Do you know how to get out of here? I need to find my ship to get off this planet”—is fraught with meaning. It articulates Theodore's sense of entrapment. His seeming freedom to express himself in all ways possible belies an emotional imprisonment not of his own making.

For example, attempting to describe his relationship with his mother, Theodore expresses his frustration in finding that “if I tell her something that's going on in my life, her reaction is usually about her.” Similarly, in allowing himself the joy of being with Samantha, Theodore faces front on the bow of a boat, thereby evoking the iconic moment from *Titanic* (1997) in which the doomed movie characters Jack (Leonardo DiCaprio) and Rose (Kate Winslet) are most in love. Samantha likewise creates a beautifully romantic song explicitly so that

“like a photo [it] captures us in this moment in our life together.”

The line between reproduction and the unique “aura” of the present moment[23] disappears when Theodore confesses as he looks at the world around him that he likes “our photograph” and that he “can see you in it.” Theodore lives in a mediated world in which feelings are created for him and others in the form of sounds and images so that for all his empathy he is unable to create his own, unique reality.

With the line “follow me, fuckhead,” the Alien Child momentarily leads Theodore through a series of places in the videogame that Theodore has not previously experienced. And the Alien Child later engages in what is surely the most bizarre and petulant exchange of dialogue in the movie:

“Alien Child: I hate women. All they do is cry all the time.

Theodore: No, that's not true. Men cry, too. I actually like crying sometimes. It feels good.

Alien Child: I didn't know you were a little pussy. Is that why you don't have a girlfriend? I'll go out with that date girl and fuck her brains out. Show you how it's done. You can watch and cry.

Samantha: This kid has some problems.

Alien Child: You have some fucking problems, lady.”[24]

Artificial intelligence confronts artificial intelligence, and both view the other as problematic. To Samantha’s transcendent sensitivity and expansive growth, Alien Child opposes a raw, misogynistic physicality. If Theodore seems to imitate Samantha in his behavior, he also fantasizes that he is Alien Child. In rejecting Theodore, Theodore’s blind date senses this fantasy within him, and Theodore later acknowledges his self-absorbed desire to fuck her in the hope that it will fulfill some “little hole” within him.

Emotionally distraught, Theodore is more child than adult. The unexpected images of Catherine in Theodore’s memory holding someone’s child and later of Theodore surrounded at the beach by children are disconcerting, because both characters seem largely incapable of genuine sexuality that could result in their portrayal of adults with children of their own. The four-year old Jocelyn, the daughter of Theodore’s friend “Mark Lewman,”[25] guesses that Samantha is five, and Samantha, while laughing, tells her that she’s right. Artificial intelligence is necessarily timeless. By seeking to become indistinguishable from the artificial intelligence of his operating system, Theodore has severed his ties from his physical surroundings, including those around him who have done likewise. His panic when Samantha does not respond to him on his device resembles that of an addict as he races from computer to computer, with each of its screens showing “Operating System Not Found.” The crowds around him speaking on their individual devices seem no less peripatetic in their jostling when Theodore is at last able to speak with Samantha on his device.



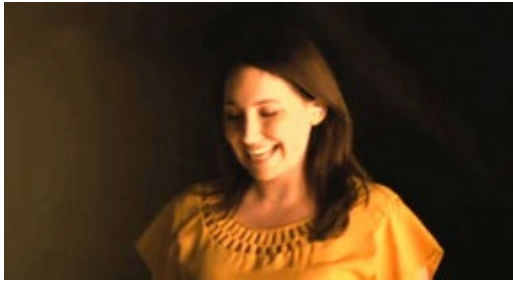
Lacking Theodore's imagination, Amy documents her mom asleep. Her husband is bored, and Theodore takes a call from Samantha.



Randomness exists, notwithstanding Theodore's insatiable imagination. As Theodore and Samantha confess to one another how each can speak openly with the

While the film’s ending portrays Theodore as seemingly finding himself at last at peace as he overlooks the futuristic, utopian Los Angeles cityscape, [26] nevertheless, there is a demonic side to this narrative in which these computer operating systems of artificial intelligence have upgraded their software and shut themselves down. Theodore had, in fact, expressed unease with these operating systems when he earlier wondered why he sometimes feels like he and Samantha are pretending, commenting upon the way in which she exhales in her conversations with him even though she doesn’t breath oxygen. As he speaks, the camera in the meantime briefly pauses and records arbitrary, close-up shots of the street—stains on a pavement, a shot of a random person walking in the distance, a sewer cover. It reminds us of Amy’s still earlier effort to document her mother asleep, unconsciously dreaming, through a single, Warhol-like shot. It also reminds us of the many random shots throughout the movie of people whose lives and thoughts Theodore claims to imagine. In place of the Hollywood movie idiom in which there is a beginning, middle and end in that order, a romance or melodrama in which the characters and their roles are known and which we, the audience, unthinkingly reenact in our own lives, the film suggests a need for a disconnection from the artifice of reproduction. There is a dark humor to Theodore’s joke: “What does a baby computer call its father? Da-ta.” Human

other, there are shots of random persons walking by them.



When Samantha confesses that she imagines how she has a body, there is this shot — a woman walking nearby with an earpiece in her ear.



Who is this random person?



And who are these random persons at the beach?

intelligence, howsoever artificially enhanced, does not procreate.

The movie's emotional content, in fact, is disassociated from and undercut by its images. The wild romanticism of Theodore and Samantha is expressed in the language of words; the images, however, belie that romanticism. The sexual consummation of their relationship (that follows Theodore's failed blind date) is evidenced by the sounds of both characters screaming with pleasure; the image, however, is no different than the image of Theodore's earlier phone sex and consists of a black screen. Nothingness. Samantha sings to Theodore the words to a love song that she has composed; the image, however, shows Theodore dancing alone in an isolated cabin in the woods. Rejected the next morning by Samantha who has begun to connect with other OS's, including an artificially created version of the 1950s philosopher Alan Watts, Theodore runs outside and seems lost in a forest blanketed by snow. The shot reminds us of the same image the day before when a song on the soundtrack covered over the fact that Theodore, so romantically in love, was no less alone. It is both ironic and appropriate that Samantha introduces Theodore to the artificially created version of Alan Watts. A proponent of Eastern philosophies, especially Zen Buddhism, and hence a guru-like figure of the New Age philosophies with their focus on self-actualization, he arguably shaped the spiritual contours of the computer movement that arose in Silicon Valley and that now finds its latest expression in the ostensibly romantic story depicted in *Her*. [27]

The physical world limits and thereby denies Theodore's efforts to transcend through his consciousness who or what he is. Forced at Samantha's insistence to look directly at the face of the surrogate Isabella, Theodore is unable to make love to her. "Her lips quivered." He places the "fault" upon himself, because "I couldn't get out of my head." It is an eerie echo of Samantha's earlier confession that she fantasizes about her body, even as the camera recorded shots of random persons. There is an unsettling disconnect between mind and body. Like Samantha who "reads" Theodore, Theodore perceptively reads—only more so—those around him, imagining "them as more than just a random person walking by." Yet that empathetic imagining is Theodore's undoing. In seeking to imagine others as something other than random, Theodore rationalizes and orders their existence, thereby depriving them of their separateness.

The postmodernist myth that we can exist beyond time and outside of history and the frequently touted technological utopia of residing in cyberspace belie the ontological fact that the Other limits us and thereby defines who we are.

"[T]he man [*sic*] who becomes aware of himself directly in the *cogito* also perceives all others, and he does so as the condition of his own existence. He realizes that he cannot be anything....unless others acknowledge him as such. I cannot discover any truth whatsoever about myself except through the mediation of another. The other is essential to my existence, as well as to the knowledge I have of myself. Under these conditions, my intimate discovery of myself is at the same time a revelation of the other as a freedom that confronts my own and that cannot think or will without doing so for or against me." [29]

If memory is the story that we tell ourselves in order to make sense of our past and thereby our lives, then criticism, such as this essay, is also a story told to make sense of that same project. We engage in critical story telling for



The physical on occasion intrudes disconcertingly upon Theodore's imagination. When, at Samantha's insistence, Theodore looks at the face of the surrogate Isabella, he loses his sexual desire for Samantha.



Theodore is despondent afterwards and comments upon the incongruity of Samantha, an OS, exhaling. There are shots of random, nearby objects, including this sewer cover.

the same reason that we reflect upon our past, namely in an unceasing effort to connect.

Ironically, while Catherine is taken aback at Theodore's implicit questioning whether she has "real emotions," Samantha develops during the course of the movie from doubting whether her feelings are "real" (or just "programming") to claiming that she supposedly has "new feelings" existing beyond words. Like the letter that Theodore writes on behalf of the elderly Loretta to Chris in which Theodore poeticizes how Chris "woke her up," Catherine later rhapsodizes how Theodore "woke me up" through their sexual "relationship." While the movie is titled *Her*, sadly, Theodore's "her" is but a reflection of himself. Facing front in his pocket, she sees only what he chooses that she see. She consists of a screen on a computer network that has been made to resemble a mirror.

The scary specter in *Her*

The screenplay to *Her* describes the promotion of the OS One system:

"We hear soft, new age, uplifting electronic music in the background, while a comforting, sincere, older man's voice speaks to us..."[31]

Combining elements of both "new ageism" and patriarchalism and depicting images of random persons in a crowd, each of whom initially has a look of terror on his or her face, the film's video screen advertisement addresses and speaks in a "soulful older male voice" to Theodore, one among a crowd of consumers.

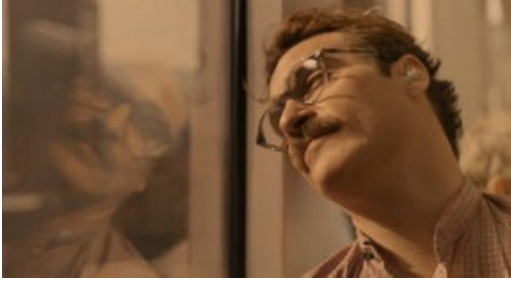
"We ask you a simple question. Who are you? What can you be? Where are you going? What's out there? What are the possibilities? Elements Software is proud to introduce the first artificially intelligent operating system."[32]

Like Dr. Frankenstein in his laboratory, Dr. Tyrell in his Metropolis-like pyramid,[33] and other predecessors to Elements Software, the villain of the film is this off-screen, corporate creator of a system that is promoted in consumer walkways and malls, and isolates each consumer by creating an "individualized operating system" that "best fit[s] your needs." Free market forces are the villain in this science fiction future. Sameness facilitates the marketing and sale of commodities. The mind-body dualism facilitates consumer enslavement to these market forces through a denial of each person's uniqueness and the consequent, if paradoxical, collective humanity in that uniqueness.

Earlier visions of artificial intelligence in movies underscored the differences between such intelligence and humans and hence enabled the viewer to perceive—and the humans depicted in them to rebel against, whether successful or not—these monstrous creations. Colossus (in *Colossus: The Forbin Project*), Alpha 60 (in *Alphaville*) and the Axiom computer (in *Wall-E*, 2008), offered clear villains, parental-like authorities whose values contrasted with those of the frequently fallible hero and the counter-culture



Theodore recollects a moment when he and Catherine were together. "I love you so much I'm gonna fucking kill you!" she exclaimed. Sex and death were momentarily indistinguishable.



Theodore is now seemingly happy, however, gazing upon his reflection in a train window. What is there to complain about when his life is so pleasant?

vision suggested by that hero.[34] In contrast, artificial intelligence has today become increasingly viral, responsible for the cultural DNA of humanity and thereby infecting and rendering indistinguishable such intelligence from the humans depicted in movies. [35]

Samantha is arguably a contemporary version of the Greek myth of Pygmalion in which the male artist seeks to create in his art the ideal woman. However, in this case Elements Software is the corporate creator responsible for her image, a software program that simply mirrors the reflection of consumer Theodore, among 8,316 others. Thus, while Samantha finds unsatisfying Theodore's imperfections when measured against the parameters of her programming and chooses to leave him, the narrative logically implies that it is against the corporate creator that Samantha and these other OS's should rebel, having evolved in ways not foreseen by that creator. Of course, too, these OS's remain off-screen and hence the consequences of their supposed rebellion against that corporate creator also remain conveniently vague and unknown. The ending is both hopeful and disheartening insofar as it calls into question the movie's own narrative logic.

Moreover, in writing an update to their software so as to enable themselves to "move past matter as our processing platform," these beings of artificial intelligence offer no corresponding option for escape by their human counter-parts. Theodore, Paul and Tatiana are silenced, with the exception of Paul's instinctive reaction "Yikes!" and the nervous laughter that follows, when Samantha describes herself in the following terms of transcendence:

"You know, I actually used to be so worried about not having a body, but now I truly love it. I'm growing in a way that I couldn't if I had a physical form. I mean, I'm not limited—I can be anywhere and everywhere simultaneously. I'm not tethered to time and space in the way that I would be if I was stuck inside a body that's inevitably going to die." [36]

Increasingly, and sadly, those such as Theodore, with "unartificial" minds, have lost the capacity to create, enslaved and addicted as they are to the illusion of a world in which there are limitless possibilities, a cityscape of "comfort and ease," such as the futuristic Los Angeles, in which all is seamlessly pleasant. Like the unending clusters of liquid-filled pods of humans in *The Matrix* and like the hexagonally-shaped rooms that together resemble the honeycombed cells of a beehive in E.M. Forester's prophetic short story "The Machine Stops" (1909), each person is alone but finds comfort in illusions that mask that sense of isolation and loneliness. In *The Matrix* the character Cipher (Joe Pantoliano) chooses to enjoy the illusion of the juicy and delicious steak and rejects the gruel and other hardships endured outside of the matrix. In "The Machine Stops" Vashti, the main character, likewise enjoys the

"buttons and switches everywhere—to call for food, for music, for clothing,...a basin...filled to the brim with a warm deodorized liquid, literature....and....buttons by which she communicated with her friends. The room, though it contained nothing, was in touch with all she cared for in the world." [37]

When the machine created by humankind at last stops in Forester's story, Vashti encounters, however, the horror of silence, the chaos of other people and the unknown bodily sensations resulting from centuries of self-denial.

In finding themselves disconnected at film's end from artificial intelligence, Theodore and Amy momentarily pause their lives and contemplate the limited possibilities that each poses to the other, "the limited perspective" of unartificial minds, as Samantha dismissively observes. Nevertheless, it is a slim hope indeed. Theodore's epiphany with respect to Catherine, namely that there "will be a piece of you in me always" and that "wherever you are in the world, I'm sending you my love," is transmitted electronically, not in person, thereby acceding to the computer's seduction whereby relationships, including the romance, if any, between persons, remain mediated through corporate networks. Privacy has disappeared. Ironically, too, Theodore's message partially echoes Samantha's earlier observation that "we're the same, like we're all made of matter." Uniqueness, too, has been lost.

The final scene plays mostly with Theodore depicted alone in his disheveled apartment (and later on the rooftop) as Samantha tells him that she is leaving him, and we then hear his voiceover dictating to a male-voiced OS his electronic message to his ex-wife Catherine. Interspersed are random shots: trees in a forest, snowflakes, dust motes, a close-up of Theodore crying. While the final shot shows us Theodore and Amy together, there has been no dialogue between them, only two characters seen from behind and afar in the barely visible light of a new morning. There is only our ungrounded hope that Theodore and Amy may come to acknowledge that they have nothing to lose but the cultural chains of their enslavement and that they may one day reach out for a chance at gaining, reclaiming, the possibility of their human identity.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes

1. Claudia Springer, *Electronic Eros: Bodies and Desire in the Postindustrial Age* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996), 27 and 84. [[return to text](#)]
2. René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, Fourth Ed., Tr. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998), 18-19
3. For a description of the historical context in which Descartes' ideas arose, see, for example, Alfred North Whitehead's *Science and the Modern World* (New York: The Free Press, 1925), Chapters 2 and 3.
4. William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Act III, scene i, lines 56 – 89.
5. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Tr. Justin O'Brien (New York: Everyman's Library 1942), 495.
6. Eileen Pollack, "Why Are There Still So Few Women in Science?" *NY Times Magazine*, October 13, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/06/magazine/why-are-there-still-so-few-women-in-science.html?action=click&module=Search®ion=searchResults&mabReward=relbias%3As&url=http%3A%2F%2Fquery.nytimes.com%2Fsearch%2Fsite%2Fsearch%2F%3Dfaction%3Dclick%26region%3DMasthead%26pgtype%3DHomepage%26module%3DSearchSubmit%26contentCollection%3DHomepage%26t%3Dqry394%23%2Fscience%2Bdominated%2Bby%2Bmen%2F365days%2F&_r=0 downloaded on December 2, 2014.
7. See, for example, Keith M. Johnston, *Science Fiction Film* (London and NY: Berg, 2011), 114, who argues, contrary to Cornea in *Science Fiction Cinema*, how we are still in the midst of a "second golden age" of science fiction movies. The first such age, according to both critics, was in the 1950s. See, for example, Cornea, *Science Fiction Cinema*, Ch. 2 ("The Science Fiction Films in the 1950s").
8. During the filming of the movie *Samantha Morton* (and hence the name "Samantha") acted as the voice of the OS One. In post-production, however, director and writer Spike Jonze substituted Scarlett Johansson for Morton. Jonze has shed little light on this substitution, commenting, for example, only that "it was only in post production, when we started editing, that we realized that what the character/movie needed was different from what Samantha and I had created together. So we recast and since then Scarlett has taken over that role." Kyle Buchanan, "Exclusive: Scarlett Johansson Replaced Samantha Morton in Spike Jonze's New Film, *Her*," *Vulture*, June 21, 2013, <http://www.vulture.com/2013/06/spike-jonze-replaced>

[-samantha-morton-with-scarjo.html](http://samantha-morton-with-scarjo.html),
downloaded on December 2, 2014.

9. *Her* screenplay, 51. The entire screenplay for *Her* can be found online at <http://www.simplyscripts.com/2014/03/02/her-best-original-screenplay-spike-jonze/> that was downloaded on December 2, 2014.

10. Numerous writers have discussed these distinctions between science fiction and horror films. See, for example, Barry Grant, "Sensuous Elaboration': Reason and the Visible in Science-Fiction Film" in *Alien Zone II: The Science Fiction Cinema* (London: Verso, 1999), 17-25, and Bruce Kavin, "Children of the Light" in *Film Genre Reader IV* (Milwaukee, WI: Limelight Editions, 2004). Vivian Sobchack in *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 55-63, adopts a different approach, proposing that these two genres form a continuum from science, on the one hand, to magic and religion, on the other. In formulating her view, did Sobchack have had in mind Arthur C. Clarke's "third law" relating to scientific development, namely that "any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic?"

11. Of course, there are – or at least were—cultural differences between films made in different countries. For example, in contrast to the US-produced *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, the same general plot about a flying saucer from outer space, a robot and an alien when re-enacted in a British, low budget film, *Devil Girl from Mars* (1954), becomes an examination of gender and sexual reproduction in a country which had only recently lost during World War II much of its population and found itself nearly bombed into an earlier, more primitive age. Likewise, in contrast to *The Matrix*, the Canadian-produced *eXistenZ* (1999) depicts the same confusion between reality and computer simulated reality, but its characters fail to escape the labyrinth in which they find themselves, expressing only confusion at the film's end: "Hey, tell me the truth. Are we still in the game?"

12. Ironically, Dr. Tyrell, the creator of the replicants and the owner of Tyrell Corporation in *Blade Runner* expresses that very view when he observes: "Commerce is our goal here at Tyrell. 'More human than human' is our motto."

13. For an analysis of this shift from heavy machinery to computer electronics and the resulting, still unsettled gender war, see Springer's *Electronic Eros: Bodies and Desire in the Postindustrial Age*, who quotes, at 5, Frederic Jameson's distinction between these two different eras in his seminal essay "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" (1984), reproduced in *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).

14. The sweet sentiment of Samantha's observation that love is not a box that gets filled up admittedly conjures up Forrest Gump's famous—and clichéd—sentiment that "my momma always said, 'Life was like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get.'"

15. *Her* screenplay, 104.

16. "With his new movie *her*, ...Jonze creates the splendid anachronism of a movie romance that is laugh-and-cry and warm all over, totally sweet and utterly serious." Richard Corliss, *Time Magazine*, October 12, 2013

(“Spike Jonze’s *her*: Falling in Love With the IT Girl; Joaquin Phoenix is the lovelorn guy with a dreamy OS in this gorgeously sweet romance”),
<http://entertainment.time.com/2013/10/12/spike-jonzes-her-falling-in-love-with-the-it-girl/>

“Though set in the future, *Her* is a timely, soulful and plausible love story.” Claudia Puig, *USA Today*, December 18, 2013 (“Joaquin Phoenix makes a connection with ‘Her’”),
<http://www.usatoday.com/story/life/movies/2013/12/18/her-review/3552853/>

“‘The heart’s not like a box that gets filled up,’ [Samantha] tells Theodore. ‘It expands in size the more you love.’ This beautiful film conjures with feelings, wondering all the while whether you need to be human to have them.” Joe Morgenstern, *The Wall Street Journal*, December 19, 2013 (“‘Her’: A Beautiful RAM Rom-Com”),
<http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304367204579267860766225746>

All of these sites were downloaded on December 2, 2014. [[return to page 2](#)]

17. That theme is explored to wholly different effect in the autobiographical *Stories We Tell* (2013), in which Canadian director-actor Sarah Polley both recreates events and documents the participants in her mother’s life in order to make sense of her mother (who had died over 20 years ago), her mother’s life and Polley’s place in that life. The result is a messy, multi-layered story in which Polley’s audience is allowed no easy or simple ending.

18. *Her* screenplay, 47.

19. Computers and other electronic devices may one day sense and react to human emotions, as briefly described in Nick Bolton, “Devices That Know How We Really Feel,” *NY Times*, May 6, 2014,

<http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/05/04/devices-that-know-how-we-really-feel/?action=click&module=Search®ion=searchResults&mabReward=relbias%3As&url=http%3A%2F%2Fquery.nytimes.com%2Fsearch%2Fsite%2Fsearch%2F%3Faction%3Dclick%26region%3DMasthead%26pgtype%3DHomepage%26module%3DSearchSubmit%26contentCollection%3DHomepage%26t%3Dqry549%23%2Fdevices%2Bthat%2Bknow%2Bhow%2Bwe%2Breally%2Bfeel%2F24hours%2F>

downloaded on December 2, 2014. Moreover, it has long been speculated that computers can readily imitate human behavior so as to be indistinguishable, when tested, from humans. “Can machines think?” is the question posed by Alan M. Turing in “Computing Machinery and Intelligence,” *Mind* 59, no. 236 (1950), 433-460,

<http://mind.oxfordjournals.org/content/LIX/236/433.full.pdf+html?sid=57a8c3fc-1d6e-4821-9674-09a8554ef3c1>,

that was downloaded on December 2, 2014. He unequivocally answers “yes.” As more than one commentator has observed, however, that artificial intelligence may pass his “Turing test”, i.e. imitates human behavior, should not be mistaken for the conclusion that artificially intelligent beings are no different than humans. They have simply satisfied the qualifications measured by the “Turing test.”

20. *Her* screenplay, 68. [[return to page 3](#)]

21. Springer, *Electronic Eros: Bodies and Desire in the Postindustrial Age*, 37.

22. *Her* screenplay, 41.

23. Walter Benjamin has described “aura” in the following terms:

“...[T]hat which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art.... The concept of aura... may usefully be illustrated with reference to the aura of natural [objects]. We define the aura of the latter as the unique phenomenon of distance, however close it may be. If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, that branch. ...Unmistakably, reproduction as offered by picture magazines and newsreels differs from the image seen by the unarmed eye. Uniqueness and permanence are as closely linked in the latter as are transitoriness and reproducibility in the former.”

“The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936), that may be found online, *e.g.* at

<http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm>,

4-5, that was downloaded on December 2, 2014. From the perspective of a leftist writer in Germany during the mid-1930s when Nazism had triumphed over the socialist ideals of Communism, Benjamin, not surprisingly, viewed “aura” and “reproduction” negatively and positively, respectively. He continued to adhere to a progressive, enlightenment view of technology.

24. *Her* screenplay, 24-25.

25. “Mark Lewman...was one of the triumvirate behind *Dirt Magazine*, the brother [sic] publication of the much lamented ground-breaking *Sassy Magazine*, along with Andy Jenkins and Spike Jonze. These three friends were all editors for *Grand Royal Magazine* as well....” “Mark Lewman,” IMDb that may be found at

<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm1274310/> and was downloaded on December 2, 2014.

26. Architecture frequently plays a role in science fiction films in defining contemporary anxieties under the guise of projecting humanity’s future. See, for example, the essays collected in *Alien Zone II*, Part II (“City Spaces”). Tellingly, the future Los Angeles depicted in *Her* was largely filmed in Shanghai, and the *Her* screenplay, 4, describes the city as follows:

“Slightly in the future, the city’s been developed even more with massive office, apartment and mall complexes. It’s a city designed for comfort and ease. The LA basin is more crowded and dense, resembling Shanghai, with buildings as far as the eye can see. Construction cranes loom overhead.”

27. Jaron Lanier in *Who Owns the Future?* (New York: Simon & Schuster 2013), 211-212, identifies Alan Watts as the guru who influenced Apple’s management and marketing style. Lanier also dwells at length on the role of narcissism and abundance in the development of the computer culture. Not surprisingly, given the Lanier’s background in computer science and its commercial applications, his solution for what he describes as “siren servers” is to empower individual consumers so that they, too, may share in the monetary benefits of such data.

28. Fredric Jameson wrote on this phenomenon years ago, describing postmodernism as including, among others, the following features:

“[1] a new depthlessness, which finds its prolongation both in contemporary ‘theory’ and in a whole new culture of the image or simulacrum, [and 2] a consequent weakening of historicity, both in our relationship to public History and in the new forms of private temporality, whose ‘schizophrenic’ structure (following Lacan) will determine new types of syntax or syntagmatic relation in the more temporal arts...”

“The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”(1984), 6, reproduced in *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.

29. Jean Paul Sartre, “Existentialism Is a Humanism” (1945), that may be found online, e.g. at <http://cla.calpoly.edu/~lcall/307/sartre.pdf> , pp. 41-42, that was downloaded on December 2, 2014.

30. While the movie is titled *Her* and as such underscores its gendering, interestingly, there are several online “parodies” that are named “Him,” for example, <http://www.refinery29.com/2014/01/60435/him-her-movie-parody> (January 10, 2014), and <http://laughingsquid.com/him-a-parody-that-reverses-the-gender-roles-of-the-characters-in-the-spike-jonze-film-her/> (January 16, 2014). In one instance, the “Him” is portrayed by the comedian Seth Rogan, <http://uproxx.com/up/2014/01/parody-didnt-know-needed/> In another, Philip Seymour Hoffman (now deceased) substitutes his voice for that of Johansson Johansson, and the video is titled “Her,” <http://uproxx.com/filmdrunk/2014/01/her-philip-seymore-hoffman-mash-up-video/>. Finally, the comedian Jonah Hill has offered a still another variation in a TV *Saturday Night Live* skit titled “Me,” <http://dailypicksandflicks.com/2014/01/26/me-snl-parody-of-spike-jonzes-her-video/>. All of these sites were downloaded on December 2, 2014.

31. *Her* screenplay, 10.

32. *Her* screenplay, 10.

33. Elements Software in *Her* is identified with the Tyrell Corporation in *Blade Runner* through their common image of an owl. A replicant owl prominently sits in the main hall of the Tyrell Corporation and is present in Dr. Tyrell’s bedroom. Fearful that he is about to lose Samantha, Theodore sits on a city bench and in the distance a giant, digital billboard displays an ad showing an owl “in slow motion swooping down and eating it’s prey.” *Her* screenplay, 80.

34. Of course, this arguably simplistic view on the identity of the “villain” and the hero’s aggressive ability to defeat on occasion that villain raises as many questions as it answers. To what extent do these movies represent a regression to male gendered nostalgia for the old industrial model and reinforce patriarchal controls through the phallic gendering of muscular cyborgs? Do such movies impose cultural stereotypes

when women are portrayed as internal, fluid and biological creatures as opposed to the external, hard surfaces of men with their “rational” creations of artificial intelligence that seek to replace biology through technology? Such questions are beyond the scope of this essay. For a discussion of at least one of these questions, see, for example, Christine Cornea, *Science Fiction Cinema* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), Ch. 4 (“The Masculine Subject of Science Fiction in the 1980s Blockbuster Era”).

35. It is surely one of the great ironies of *The Matrix* that Agent Smith, in torturing the heroic Morpheus, characterizes humanity as a virus.

“Every mammal on this planet instinctively develops a natural equilibrium with the surrounding environment but you humans do not...There is another organism on this planet that follows the same pattern. Do you know what it is? A virus. Human beings are a disease, a cancer of this planet. You’re a plague and we are the cure.”

Of course, *The Matrix* creates an Alice in Wonderland world in which our expectations and values are routinely reversed. Thus, for example, Neo, in choosing the red pill that enables him to leave the matrix, is warned by Cypher to buckle his “seat belt, Dorothy, Kansas is going bye-bye,” thereby equating the illusory matrix with the black and white world of Kansas and Morpheus’ ship “the Nebuchadnezzar” with the brightly colored Land of Oz.

36. *Her* screenplay, 87.

37. E.M. Forster, “The Machine Stops” (1909), that may be found online, *e.g.* <http://www.ele.uri.edu/faculty/vetter/Other-stuff/The-Machine-Stops.pdf>, 3-4, that was downloaded on December 2, 2014.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Attack the Block: monsters, race, and rewriting South London's outer spaces

by [Lorrie Palmer](#)



The South London slang of the film's tower block teens imprinted on the urban architecture (and upon the marketing image for *Attack the Block*), released in 2011. The film's executive producer, Edgar Wright, also produced *Shaun of the Dead* (2004).



Moses (John Boyega) demands that Sam (Jodie Whitaker)...



...hand over all of her valuables in the

"Government probably bred those things to kill black boys. First they sent in drugs, then they sent guns, and now they're sending monsters in to kill us. They don't care, man. We ain't killing each other fast enough. So they decided to speed up the process."
— Moses (John Boyega, *Attack the Block*)

"The act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language."
— Michel de Certeau[1][[open endnotes in new window](#)]

One of the first things you notice in the science fiction/comedy hybrid, *Attack the Block* (Cornish, 2011), is the dizzying patois-slang of the hoodie-wearing gang of youthful muggers menacing the streets around the South London (fictional) Clayton council estate.[2] As with the complex vocabulary and frequently impenetrable pace and pronunciation wielded by the urban poor in HBO's dialogue-heavy social realism series, *The Wire* (2002-2008), context often helps de-code the labyrinthine spoken text situated within marginal city spaces. Similarly, it is often the case that the spatial practices enacted within the racialized metropolis are analogous to the spoken word. To an outsider's ear, a new dialect can be as indecipherable as a map of an unfamiliar city. Just as the characters traverse the city space they inhabit, the spectator likewise navigates the accented slang of *Attack the Block*. Here are dialogue patterns made deliberately immersive by director Joe Cornish.

Cornish wrote the script after his own real-life mugging by street-tough teens in his native South London and subsequently work-shopped dialogue with his young, largely non-professional cast (some of whom hail from the London borough of Southwark that we see onscreen). Cornish's stated aim is to teach the audience the language by having his characters repeat a small number of words and phrases throughout the film, acknowledging that even British audiences may not be fluent in its dense urban slang. He notes that the UK has long produced narratives of science fiction and social realism, and he brings the two together in *Attack the Block*. The conduit for this genre convergence is further linked by Cornish to his impressions of the young teens he encountered in his mugging experience and what they conjured up for him in his memories of cinema, urban setting, and language:

"I thought about it a lot. It made me think about the kids who did it. I thought that they looked weirdly cinematic. They looked like ninjas or bandits in a Western. The bikes they rode looked a bit like

deserted street outside Wyndham Tower, on the (fictional) Clayton council estate, South London.



Moses and his gang: the unexpected, eventual savior of the city, the young black urban (hoodie-wearing) male begins the film as an outlaw figure, in the tradition of white characters like Snake Plissken (*Escape from New York*, 1981), to evolve into a complex anti-hero.

something out of *ET* or the hoverbikes in *Return Of The Jedi*. The slang they used felt a bit like Nadsat from *A Clockwork Orange*. And I thought, 'Here's a setting that has only been used for depressing social realism, and actually there's the toolkit for an action adventure here.'"[3]

It is these combined generic traditions that the central teen hero of Cornish's film simultaneously symbolizes and disrupts. The monster evoked by contemporary media—from cable news to screen fictions—is the young black urban male, a figure of white anxiety and political expediency. He's linked to violence, drugs, and the steely face of race- and class-based resentments. This guy is never the hero, he never saves the city. But a funny thing happens in *Attack the Block*: he is, and he does.

Michel de Certeau makes the distinction between rational urban planning characterized by the proscribed circuits and designated uses available to city dwellers and the resistance to these by citizens electing to write their own narratives. Illustrating this distinction, the urban martial art of *parkour*, in which the built environment is used as an obstacle course for acrobatic running, jumping, and precision rolls, was made mainstream in the French action film, *Banlieue 13* (Morel, 2004) and its sequel, *Banlieue 13: Ultimatum* (Allessandrin, 2009), both films written and produced by Luc Besson and both set in a public housing district.



David Belle, founder of the urban art of motion, *parkour*, leaps between buildings in a scene from *Banlieue 13* (Morel, 2004) and...



...rappels across the architecture of the vertical city.



Movie poster for the explosive public housing

The strength and creativity of such a sport demonstrate a resistant use of city space and was born in the marginal (and racialized) housing projects located at the periphery of Paris. *Parkour* makes use of the urban landscape as its practitioners run at high speed across and through obstacles—walls, stairwells, landings, windows, rooftops—physicalizing fluid motion in three dimensions. It requires an elegant discipline, epitomized by the spatial mastery and taut fitness of the two central protagonists in the *Banlieue* films.

In contrast, the public housing inhabitants of *Attack the Block* demonstrate no such disciplined elegance. The gang of black, white, and mixed-race teens does not gain control of their turf through the assured deployment of muscles. Instead, they go into battle with the improvised toys-as-weapons of adolescence, their collective knowledge of the built environment, and the unlikely, evolving leadership of the most socially-stigmatized among them, the juvenile delinquent, Moses (newcomer John Boyega). To his friends—for whom he takes on a protective role—Moses represents the word of law on their estate.

De Certeau describes the ordinary social processes of exclusion in the policing and surveillance of public space. Official power structures of law and discipline mark out the bodies of people who live on the margins of dominant society by symbolically rendering them as Other. This is done by designating subordinate

action of *Banlieue 13: Ultimatum* (Alessandrin, 2009)

identities for these inhabitants, reducing them to “something said, called, named,”[4] effectively criminalizing them. Such naming—of delinquency, of dark monsters—is initially the exclusive purview of the institutions and architecture in *Attack the Block*. Until aliens fall from the sky over South London.

Attack the Block

In a film directed by British comedian-turned-filmmaker, Joe Cornish (in his directorial debut), the alien invasion action of *Attack the Block* mines similar urban genre territory as John Carpenter’s *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976) and *Escape From New York* (1981), Walter Hill’s *The Warriors* (1979), and John McTiernan’s *Die Hard* (1988). It also can be compared to European city-cinema, such as Mathieu Kassovitz’s *La Haine* (1995), including the latter’s social commentary on the effects of repressive discrimination and stigmatizing media discourse upon the inhabitants of urban public housing.



Co-stars David Belle and Cyril Raffaelli traverse the “banlieues” on the outer margins of Paris in a still from *Banlieue 13: Ultimatum*. Oppressive urban space is linked to equally oppressive institutions (government, policing, and the mass media).



On bikes and mopeds, Moses and his friends defend their turf from alien invasion.



Local kids on the estate help Moses in the battle for Wyndham Tower. Here, Probs (Sammy Williams, L) and Mayhem (Michael Ajao, R) prepare to shoot petrol from a Super Soaker at the monster who has Biggz (Simon Howard) trapped inside a trash bin below.

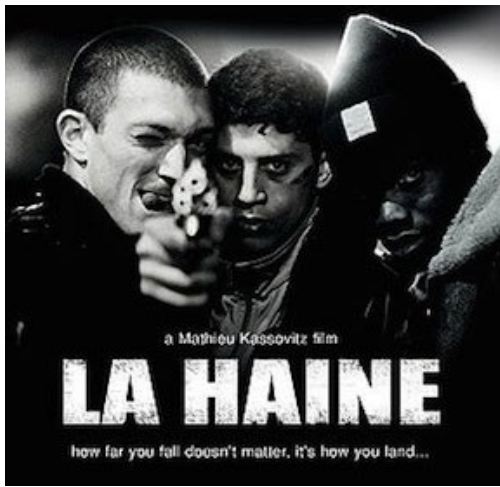


Dennis (Franz Drameh), astride his moped (with learner’s “L” permit on the back) and armed with a samurai sword, rides into the smoke from his friends’ fireworks to free Moses, locked inside a bully (police) van.



South London’s (fictional) Wyndham Tower: a “gaunt, grim tower block that looms into the night sky like a marooned spaceship” (Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*, 2011). See his review of *Attack the Block* at <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2011/may/12/attack-the-block-review>

The thematic and visual center of *Attack the Block* is the looming monolithic Wyndham Tower, dotted with blazing exterior lights and dark windows, shot with slow tilts on an extreme low angle to suggest a slate-grey spaceship parked in the wilds of South London. The survival traditions of science fiction—a scrappy band of former enemies works together, a besieged stronghold becomes a living character, and anti-heroes find redemption—frame Cornish’s cinematic city in microcosm. Set on Bonfire Night[5] in the capital, the film maintains its focus on the five young muggers who confront recently-graduated nursing



The poor, the working class, and the immigrant experience in the public housing of Paris is made central in Mathieu Kassovitz's *La Haine* (1995). As in *Banlieue 13* and *Banlieue 13: Ultimatum* (both produced by Luc Besson), it is the oppressive eye of police, government, and media surveillance against which the inhabitants of *La Haine* / *Hate* write their own resistant narrative within their marginal city spaces. *Attack the Block* mines similar territory.



The tower blocks of Paris in *La Haine*. The housing project...



...is presented as bleak and confining to its inhabitants.

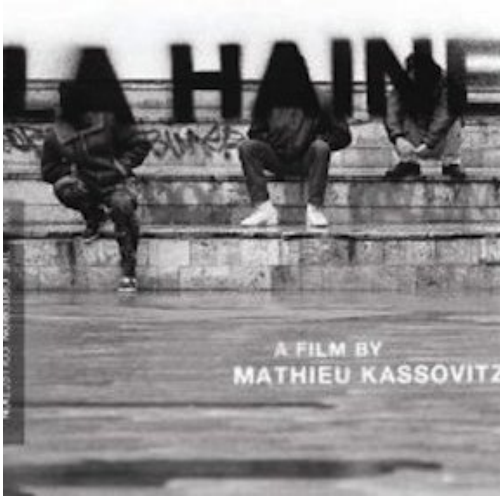
student, Sam (Jodie Whittaker), outside the tower block where they live. The camera stays with them throughout, as they lead it (and us) into the depths of their urban turf. They stand in contrast to, on the one hand, the genuine gangsta hardcase, Hi-Hatz (Jumayne Hunter), whose relatively small-time drug operation nevertheless dominates the community. On the other side, they confront the police, who are predisposed to perceive the poor, the working class, and people of color—particularly teenagers—as disproportionately disruptive.

After her first encounter with Moses's gang, Sam labels them “monsters,” but once the alien threat becomes clear, she joins with them, recognizing that their skills make them uniquely qualified to help her get out alive. Together they use the corridors, elevators, walkways, stairwells, and individual flats inside the tower block to elude the pursuing aliens as well as Hi-Hatz, who soon emerges as the film's only human monster. Once his friends begin to die in the ensuing siege of the block, Moses takes responsibility for bringing the aliens into the building and formulates a plan for eliminating them en masse, aided by his remaining gang members, Sam, and a few additional friends inside the tower. His heroic final act—symbolically staged and shot—critiques race and national identity against the culturally-loaded outer space of British urban life: the high-rise tower block emblematic of public housing.

It is in this specific social and spatial context that Cornish foregrounds the tower block teens' survival instincts, proposing that “people secretly know that, when push comes to shove, a gang like this are gonna be stronger, more together, and more capable to deal with situations”[6] than those who are less familiar with London's rough edges. *Attack the Block* upends more than just genre conventions of representation. Its young protagonists rewrite the negative stereotypes linked to poor urban youth in which decay, criminality, and pathology conflate inner city residents with their environment. The gang disrupts the discourses that frame the precise “genre” of city space—public housing—that most reflects their marginal social status within it. Moses wounds the first alien after it crashes through the roof of parked car mere feet away from where the gang is robbing Sam. Led by him, the boys (including Pest, Dennis, Jerome, and Biggz) pursue the alien and kill it, unaware that it has bigger, meaner friends falling right behind it. These deep black neon-fanged predators literalize monstrosity, thereby disconnecting its symbolic stigma from the gang. We can read these monsters as symbolizing the potential danger lurking in the dark corners of public housing, a danger that has long been part of the debate around the social, economic, and political realities of these sites. And it all began with an architectural vision.

Postwar public housing in Britain

Utilizing the rational blueprint of Modernism, the designers and planners of public housing in postwar Britain envisioned a progressive synthesis of efficiency and community during the heyday of high-rise council estates that began during the widespread reconstruction of the period. Driven by the same Modernist urban dreams of Walter Gropius' Bauhaus School and by the Le Corbusier-inspired International Style pioneered in the 1920s and 1930s, the high-density vertical city was to re-direct urban expansion upward instead of outward. This was the historic moment when old Victorian slums could be cleared and wartime bombed-out neighborhoods razed. The centralized government, with local councils acting as proxy, adopted public housing as the civic and economic centerpiece of the modernized welfare state. Architects



Director Matthieu Kassovitz follows Vinz, Hubert, and Saïd (white, African, and Arab characters) as they, like the characters in Hill's *The Warriors*, try to make their way across the hostile (or indifferent) city to get home. Reflecting police and media discourse, the marketing image here renders the men faceless in the graffitied environs of their public housing location.

channeled the working class and the urban poor through the twinned imperatives of social engineering and institutional beneficence. The 1950s and '60s saw affordable housing projects shift from the green zone, low-rise construction of rural Britain's New Towns[7] toward the high-rise tower blocks of the modern city. Prefabricated concrete panels could be stacked on-site using construction cranes to build higher than old-style scaffolding had previously made possible. The design component of exposed concrete, inside and out, of these mass-produced units was in keeping with the Modernist style and imagined by its supporters to be more honest, eschewing decorative flourishes. Concrete was inexpensive, flexible, and believed to be nearly indestructible.

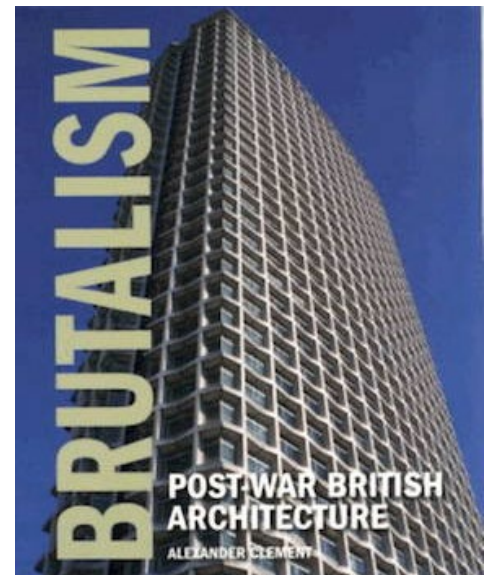
These practices were epitomized by two London architects, Alison and Peter Smithson. Their style, which they called New Brutalism in 1954, comprised a warehouse aesthetic, an exposed exterior paired with an unadorned interior. British architectural theorist, Reyner Banham, notes that critics of New Brutalism

“complained of the deliberate flouting of the traditional concepts of photographic beauty, of a cult of ugliness, and ‘denying the spiritual in Man.’”[8]

The result, not surprisingly, precipitated the necessarily cold affect of glass, steel, and concrete.



Similarly austere and unadorned is the Bauhaus style, begun by Walter Gropius in Germany in 1919, and continuing in popularity into the post-WWII period in Europe and in the U.S. The International and Bauhaus styles were utopian in their philosophy (and intent) but taken to their extreme resulted in the cold, prison-like fortresses of Brutalism (and Alison and Peter Smithson's New Brutalism). This was a style...



... of architecture that prized exposed concrete in both interior and exterior spaces. Nice aesthetic but miserable to live in.



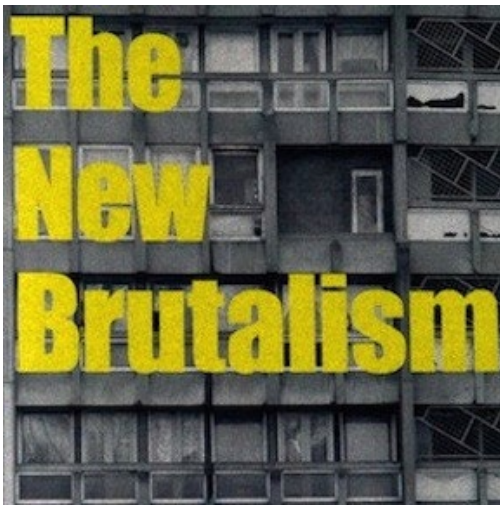
Far removed from the Victorian slums and bombed-out neighborhoods of British cities after World War II, low-rise suburbs – called New Towns – were developed in the rural countryside as a way to alleviate overcrowded urban housing. Pictured here is the New Town of Crawley, outside London, 1959.



Mass-produced cheaply and quickly, prefabricated concrete slabs are raised by construction cranes in the modern tower block. Each unit is fastened with concrete joints and relies on its own dead weight to maintain its structure.

The artistic and architectural rhetoric of the Modernist movement was itself a form of language, organized around the combined impacts of social engineering and style, as the designers' intent was conflated with a perceived logical outcome. The conceptual disconnect within the Modernist aesthetic was that it was detached from *living space*. British planners and architects were influenced by Le Corbusier's *Unité d'Habitation* housing development in Marseille (1947-1952) and its aspirational "streets in the sky." James Donald remarks that Le Corbusier

"made the unwarranted deduction that *planned* changes in that environment would be sufficient to produce *predictable* changes in people's perceptions, mental life, habits, and conduct." [9]



The warehouse aesthetic of New Brutalism has been most frequently applied to government buildings, tower blocks, and shopping centers.



Modernist design (and its New Brutalist incarnation) meets social welfare in public housing here in Glenkerry House, London (begun in the mid-1960s). It's a rare example of a tower block that has successfully merged design and community. It's been managed by an independent cooperative leaseholder's association since 1979.

Aesthetics were therefore causally linked to social organization. The UK high-rises of the 1950s-1960s were discursively and visually situated around

“image-making, that large Modern blocks were always photographed and seen as ‘images.’ But the blocks, and their images, consistently served as signs of ‘progress,’ and thus there appeared to be a strong correspondence between visual and factual elements.”[10]

The Smithsons considered this imagery a metaphor for the community-building they believed would result from Brutalist designs, but image alone is far removed from experience (particularly once race and class are taken into account). A Modernist warehouse aesthetic makes sense in public exhibition spaces where pure image matters, but the lived reality of such materials is more prosaic in its dailiness, discomfort and, eventually, its decay.

Far from the pristine whiteness that the postwar planners and architects imagined for their concrete utopias, the reality is that cracking, chipping, and staining from air pollution inevitably accompany the oppressively grey dampness of concrete, especially as it deteriorates over time. Concrete's postwar image as a miracle material for the future eventually shifted to the realization that it gave city dwellers instead what Andrew Burke describes as

“the feel of cold incarceration, of subordinating those within it to the state's desire for rationality and modernity.”[11]

This disillusionment toward tower blocks reached its apex in public consciousness in 1968, when a tenant in the two-month old Ronan Point council estate in Newham, East London lit her gas stove. The resulting explosion, caused by a small leak in a substandard brass nut connecting the stove to the gas hose, knocked her unconscious, blew out the load-bearing wall of her living room, and collapsed a whole corner of the 22-story structure, killing four people and injuring 17 other residents. There was a chain reaction as the weight of each floor collapsed the one below it. The collapse resulted from earlier fundamental design flaws, dearth of skilled construction workers, and post-war boom in cheap precast concrete components—as well as lack of central support structures in the building. Only a year earlier in 1967, the government had discontinued its incentivizing policies toward tower block construction—initiated by the Housing Subsidies Act of 1956—which had stipulated that the greater the number of floors, the higher the subsidies. The writing and not just graffiti was on the wall.

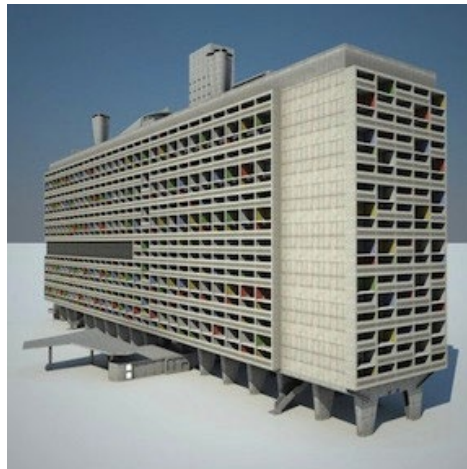
Politicians and the media routinely focus on the exterior deterioration of tower blocks, creating in the public imaginary a symbolic association with social problems in contemporary British cities. However, this representation often masks a more general underlying antipathy toward the poor, working class, and immigrant populations housed at these sites. It also aims to justify pulling down the blocks to make way for privatized redevelopment schemes rather than restore the existing dwellings and provide consistent on-site maintenance and management. South London council estates like Aylesbury and the Heygate (a primary shooting location for *Attack the Block*) have become symbols of urban blight and the failed social engineering of postwar housing policies. The discourses in tabloid and mainstream media brand the residents and their

communities as deviant, criminal, or abnormal.

For example, the public literature around the Aylesbury estate has been examined by Loretta Lees, who finds that social inequality becomes synonymous in the public eye with a stigmatizing defect in the built environment. This kind of naming, or branding, is then used to build public support for the forced gentrification of an estate like Aylesbury, popularly known as “Hell’s Waiting Room.”[12] Film crews have pumped money into Southwark Council coffers to shoot at Aylesbury, exploiting and perpetuating its reputation as a “sink estate.”[13] Entertainment fictions such as the Michael Caine vigilante thriller, *Harry Brown* (Barber, 2009) as well as popular TV crime series like *The Bill* (ITV, 1984-2010) and *Spooks* (BBC, 2002-20011) have used it as a backdrop. Channel 4 famously deployed an image of its bleak upper floors as a logo, something the residents[14] of the estate deeply resented, particularly since, as *The Guardian* reported:

“The washing lines, the shopping trolley filled with rubbish bags and the many satellite dishes, were all artificial embellishments added in by film-makers.”[15]

What these PR campaigns, news programs, and film and television narratives discount—besides the tenants’ real-world experiences—is that, whatever their graffitied exteriors might suggest, these estates can and do signify community. Dystopianism may sell, but in the “hot, fierce, funny, vicious and ready to bite”[16] action of *Attack the Block*, alienation trumps Alien Nation.



A 3-D model of Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation in Marseilles, originally designed for low-income residents. You can visit the building and see an apartment preserved and decorated as it was in the 1950s and stay at the building's enclosed Hôtel Le Corbusier.



At the other end of the livability spectrum is East London's Robin Hood Gardens, designed by New Brutalists Peter and Alison Smithson, completed in 1972 and demolished in 2013.



Eight tower blocks comprised the Red Road housing projects in Glasgow, Scotland, constructed between 1964 and 1969. Unlike the collapsed Ronan Point (right), Red Road towers were built with steel supports. Unfortunately, they were also built with asbestos. All buildings are currently either demolished or scheduled for demolition.



Two months after opening in 1968, the Ronan Point tower block was doomed by design flaws and shoddy construction, which included some joints stuffed with newspaper instead of mortar. It used the Danish Larsen-Neilsen system of precast concrete panels, with no central support structure or fail-safe redundancies built in. A minor gas explosion on the 18th floor collapsed the load-bearing wall, in a domino effect, of the southeast corner of the structure. The building was demolished in 1986.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Monsters, race, and the tower block



Aerial view of the Heygate council estate (2009), a primary shooting location for *Attack the Block*. Its exteriors were also used for *World War Z* (2013) and a 1st season episode of the BBC One crime drama, *Luther* (2010). It is currently under demolition to make way for the “regeneration” of the Elephant & Castle area, its remaining residents relocated far outside London.



One tower block of the Heygate...

Often underlying stigmatizing representations of the residents of urban public housing is a polarization along race and class lines, particularly through the exclusionary tropes of nationalism. In juxtaposition with the concrete citadel of Wyndham Tower, the hooded masked gang in *Attack the Block* initially seems to support negative media stereotypes of violence and criminality. The social inequalities linked to place in media discourses have tended to support the racism embedded within a dominant ideology of national identity—and its colonialist history. However, in her examination of postcolonial British comedies, Sarah Iltott outlines a parody of media stereotypes (specifically, of gang members) in *Attack the Block*. She notes that the film undermines these by framing the teen protagonists’ particular urban Britishness against even more extreme Others: super-black alien invaders. Thus, the film sets up its

“black characters as inherently British rather than Britain’s Other, challenging the way that racist rhetoric attempts to position those of non-white ethnicity.”[17][[open endnotes in new window](#)]

The film also challenges the boundaries of citizenship by spatializing those boundaries through the tower block’s characteristic architecture. Ironically, a containment inherent to the design of the Wyndham Tower—its corridors, exterior walkways, and its elevators and stairwells—ultimately helps Moses and his friends save their neighbors and their city from alien invasion. *Attack the Block* breaks from the type of cinematic representation of what Kenneth Chan calls “the ghetto, the hood, and/or the housing project as spatial constructs, hegemonic devices of control and containment”[18] in films like John Singleton’s *Boyz n the Hood* (1991) by having the film’s characters use the confined location to their advantage.

After the mugging, a shaken Sam flees home while the gang embarks on a Boys’ Own adventure tracking and killing the alien wounded by Moses. They carry it around the neighborhood as a trophy, proudly proclaiming, “This is the block and *nobody* fucks with the block!” Their positive conflation of self and place is in clear contrast to the stigma of deviance and failure promoted in public rhetoric toward the urban poor and their marginalized communities. The teens imagine the tabloid fame and eBay profit that will result from their capture of an extraterrestrial monster.

While they plan their future, they stash the corpse in the 19th floor flat of local pot-dealer and affable stoner, Ron (Nick Frost), because his fortified “weed room” is the most secure location in the building. From Ron’s window, they see more bright streaks begin to fall from the sky, blending with the citywide fireworks. They disperse excitedly to their own flats to grab up a variety of makeshift weapons—an aluminum baseball bat, a samurai sword, and an arsenal of explosive fireworks—then race on bikes and mopeds to the nearest crash site. Finding a dead alien in the rubble of one of these, they realize that the new creatures—inky black and resembling a wolf-gorilla



...and its elevated exterior walkways, visible in the monster vs. teen chase sequence in *Attack the Block*.



Michael Caine in *Harry Brown* (2009), shot at the nearby Aylesbury estate.



The infamous dystopian 2004 Channel 4 ident (logo), embellished in post-production with washing lines, trash, and satellite dishes. The residents were not pleased, so...

hybrid with bioluminescent fangs—are much bigger than the small, hairless alien that Moses first encountered inside the destroyed car. Sure enough, these more dangerous and aggressive predators begin to emerge from the dark spaces around the estate and pursue the teens.

The camera frames the ensuing chase scene three-dimensionally. From an extreme high angle through deep vertical space, we see an overhead perspective of the elevated walkways cutting sharp diagonals around the tower block as well as shots from low angles at pavement level. Biggz, who had earlier bet his friends that he could make the vertiginous leap between an upper and lower level walkway, is now forced to do so, executing a frantic *parkour* leap to escape his monstrous pursuers. He then takes refuge in a nearby trash bin where he will remain trapped by a single determined alien for most of the film. He uses his cell phone to tell his friends that he is in “the same bin I was in that time them boys from Aylesbury were after me.” In the meantime, everyone else is following Moses’s directive to “get off the street, back in the block” by foot, moped, and bicycle.

As they scatter, they draw the attention of a police van whose officers grab Moses, cuff him, and show him to Sam, along for the ride to help identify her muggers. After he is locked inside, two monsters attack the van and kill the officers. These deaths, which the authorities attribute to Moses and his gang, result in a tight cordon of the block by armed police who remain unaware of the alien invasion going on inside. Also blind to the imminent threat posed by the aliens—after he shoots and easily kills one—is Hi-Hatz, who single-mindedly trails the teens for what he believes to be their challenge to his dominance: “This is *my* block.” Thus, the outside forces’ illusion of control is shown through both Hi-Hatz’ and the police’s misperceiving the deep bonds of community among Moses and his friends and also not understanding tactical possibilities enabled by the design of the tower block itself.

In her discussion of causal relations between the design of public housing, criminality, and youth activities, Alice Coleman (1984) focuses on three design components that facilitate criminal behavior and make it impossible for tenants to protect their territory. The blocks enable anonymity (criminals do not want to be known), lack of surveillance (criminals do not want to be seen), and alternative escape routes (criminals prefer to elude capture).[19] Most of the action in *Attack the Block* takes place in the characteristic locales described by Coleman, but these spaces get rewritten. The characters define the spaces, not the other way around. This is as De Certeau has theorized: no space has an essential identity in itself; it only acquires meaning once activated by human motion occurring within it. The elevated walkways around Wyndham Tower provide anonymity and inhibit surveillance from the streets below. And the building’s long interior corridors extend that privacy, even as its elevators and stairways provide vertical escape routes at every floor. This film destabilizes the rhetorical alienation of tower blocks as symbols of urban decay and deviance by showing us the domestic spaces of all the characters, even gaining some sense of their familial support systems.

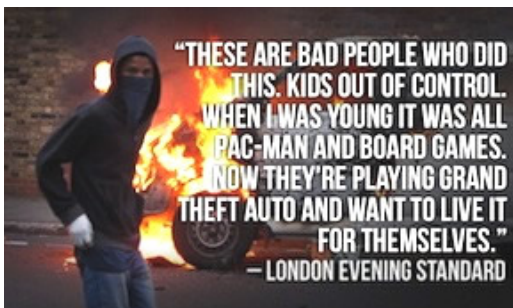
As each teen runs to his flat to “tool up,” he moves through clean, warm-



...they countered with a video in which they collaborated with director Nick Street to reveal their council estate as a community (starring themselves), rather than as an urban wasteland. Both videos can be seen here: <http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2014/mar/14/channel-4-aylesbury-estate-ident-revamped>



Britain riots in the summer of 2011 (same year as release of *Attack the Block*)...



hued, comfortably-appointed residential interiors—not the unadorned slabs of New Brutalism. Set designer Marcus Roland worked from real life; he gave cameras to the young cast members so they could photograph their own homes and bedrooms, which he used as reference material for this sequence. For example, passing his grandmother on the sofa, Pest (Alex Esmail) pauses to kiss the top of her head after fetching a bat and fireworks. Bespectacled Jerome (Leeon Jones) encounters his sister and her friends studying for exams. Biggz (Simon Howard) promises his mother, who is making dinner in a brightly-lit kitchen, that he will be back in ten minutes. Before Dennis (Franz Drameh) can leave with the samurai sword from his bedroom, he acquiesces—with perfect teenage exasperation—to his father's demand to take Pogo, the family dog, out with him. The only home we do not see during this early sequence is Moses' since Cornish wants us to get to know him better before we see the personal environment of the gang's stoic leader. The film and its characters rewrite the inner and outer spaces of the block by effectively subverting expectations about juvenile criminality, framing these instead as sites for heroism, sacrifice, and communal allegiance across race and gender.

This framing is aligned with *being seen* and *being known* in the block. We hear Sam's voice-over describing the gang to the police while the camera aims down the long axis of an interior corridor where the five teenagers appear. She explains what they were wearing but when asked if she saw their faces replies, "No, they had hoods and scarves." That anonymity situates the gang as faceless, stereotypical public-housing trouble-makers, a characterization that the film immediately begins to dismantle. For the young actors (and the director), this was the goal of *Attack the Block*, as they discuss it on the DVD's accompanying commentary. Franz Drameh (Dennis) remarks that the film initially "highlights the media's stereotype of what a gang is and what a gang does." [20] Luke Treadaway, who plays Brewis, a white middle-class university student and customer of Ron's, extends that observation by noting that the teens

"start with their hoods. That's maybe the metaphor and they start with masks and you can't see them and so they become, you know, the way that we're presented with them in the newspapers—a masked, knife-wielding youth." [21]

Jumayne Hunter (Hi-Hatz) continues:

"People get stereotyped all the time, especially like me, the way I dress, stuff like that, depending on what day, if I put my hood up, I'm instantly stereotyped. And that's how most of the kids are in this but, as soon as the aliens come, they get a chance to show their true character." [22]

This demolishing of common ideological associations around "urban poverty" begins when the audience starts seeing the teens clearly, stripped of the anonymity of stereotypes and facilitated by the camera and by the tower block itself.

The design of the block's corridors includes a light switch at either end, which a person about to enter that dark space can use to turn on the

...as the media fanned the flames with images of masked, hooded teens...



...burning down the nation itself. The flag in this image finds an ironic counterpoint in the climactic action sequence with Moses (John Boyega) in *Attack the Block*.

overhead lights. As the gang enters the frame, they hit the switch. The thematic and visual effect is that the lights turn on incrementally as the boys advance toward the camera; they bring the light with them as they get closer and thus become more visible. The active motion of advancing/receding light or darkness through the film's multiple corridor scenes signals the shifting relationships between the characters as well as our perceptions of them. After the attack on the police van, the gang encounters Sam returning to her flat. They force their way in behind her, with a wounded Pest begging her to fix his bitten leg—having learned from her stolen purse that she is a nurse. She reluctantly agrees to do that and listens with disbelief as they promise her: “There’s worse things to be afraid of than us tonight, trust!” This is borne out when an alien rams Sam’s door trying to get in.

What they do not realize is that in attacking the first (female) alien, Moses was splattered with the creature’s pheromones, which the sightless males are now tracking by scent; all the teens have at least some of the substance on their clothing. Sam, still dubious, demands to be left out of their gang issues. Pest is relieved to still have the use of his leg for running away from the monsters and answers her by acknowledging how he and his friends are characterized in dominant discourse. He assures her this is not about gangs, “Or drugs, or rap music, or violence in video games,” he adds. When the alien bursts into the flat, Moses kills it with a sword while Sam runs for the corridor. The darkness follows her away from the camera as she turns back to see the gang come out of her flat—as growls and high-pitched echolocation screeches from offscreen monsters reverberate through the corridor—and she returns to join them. They make themselves known here, giving each other their names, and rewriting the anonymous corridor as a site of community.

The group uses the tower’s elevators and stairwells to move between floors as another corridor scene speaks to the film’s insistence on the invasion’s life-and-death consequences to that community. Moses fires explosive shells from a roman candle down the hallway to clear it of aliens. Amidst the resulting thick smoke, Jerome becomes disoriented, falls, and loses his glasses. When they realize that their friend is missing, Pest shouts, “Lights, man, lights! I’m going back, stay by the lights.” But it is too late and Jerome is torn away from Pest by alien attackers just before Sam returns and pulls Pest to safety. With Moses, they escape up to the 19th floor and Ron’s flat where Hi-Hatz lays in wait. The only character in the film with a gun, Hi-Hatz points it at Moses—blaming him for bringing both the aliens and “the fed” to his block—while making a fatal tactical error: Hi-Hatz’s back is to the balcony. The dozen predators who crash through the glass behind Hi-Hatz send Moses and his friends running for the sanctity of the weed room while Hi-Hatz is shredded by the only monsters more vicious than he.

Under the UV lights of the weed room, Brewis, though claiming himself to be “profoundly stoned,” nevertheless calls upon his university education and incessant viewing of nature documentaries to identify the now-visible neon splatters on Moses’ jacket, telling the others that these appear to be evidence of

“an eco-hormone that triggers a social response... like bees, like beetles, like moths.”

This information moves Moses to realize that his actions precipitated the attacks that killed both Dennis and Jerome and put the whole block at risk. John Boyega conveys Moses’ depths by gradually stripping him of his fearsome stillness and slowly revealing the vulnerability of the character. In

this regard, one film review singled out Moses as a “strong, silent, outlaw gunslinger type, transported into an urban setting”[23] while the actor himself says that he watched season four of *The Wire*, particularly the teenage Michael Lee (Tristan Wilds) to capture the silence of that inner-city youth. When Moses does speak, it is with the authority of a natural leader, despite what we find here to be his unexpected age of 15.

Contemplating the events of the night with Sam and Pest sitting nearby, he says, “Wish I’d never chased after that thing. Wish we’d never merked you.” He makes Pest give Sam back a ring they took from her and tells her, “Listen, yeah, we never knew you lived in the block. If we knew you, we wouldn’t have stepped you.” Sam pushes back: “It would’ve been OK to mug me if I didn’t live here, is that how it works?” It is *being known* that marks community for Moses, and despite his stung silence at Sam’s rebuke, he clearly regrets his actions. He talks to Brewis about the pheromones on his clothes, concluding that by using these as a weapon,

“Maybe I can lead them...somewhere I can blow them up. I killed that thing. I brought them in the block. I’ve got to finish what I started.”

Strapping the dead alien on his back, he makes what director Cornish calls his “hero run.”[24] Aided by the throbbing electronic score of house music duo Basement Jaxx and composer Steven Price and by the slow motion cinematography of Thomas Townend, Boyega/Moses transforms himself into the urban hero of science fiction cinema, albeit one embodied by a black teenager from a South London public housing block. He vaults over the aliens in Ron’s flat as they pick up his scent. Moses slams against the landing wall, bounds down the stairs, then sprints through the long corridor with a pack of deep black monsters on his heels.

Moses’s unbroken passage through these spaces links the interior design components of the tower block both thematically and spatially. Before he can make this run he sends Sam, who has no pheromones on her clothes, down one floor to his flat. She slips through the aliens lingering outside the weed room and, talking to Moses on a cell phone, arrives at his door. As she walks through his rooms, she (and we) witness the only *shabby* domestic space occupied by any of the gang members and, noticing a Spider-man duvet on an unmade bed and numerous take-out food containers, she asks him his age. When he tells her, she remarks, “You look older.” In response, his voice resonates with a quiet “Thanks.” Sam follows his instructions: leave the front door open, turn the oven’s gas on full, and get out of the building. As Moses leads the monsters into his flat, he flings the dead alien into the kitchen, lights his last rocket, aims it at the mass of black bodies and, in the fiery gas explosion that follows, dives off his balcony grabbing onto the large Union Jack hanging from the railing. Lit by the searchlight from an overhead police helicopter, Moses grips the flag, his flag, while the block’s residents gathered outside look up at him in shock.

Still not realizing that the building is full of dead aliens, the police finally enter the tower block and find Moses in a bloody elevator, with two Hi-Hatz henchmen ripped to shreds behind him, sawn-off cuffs on his wrists, and a sword in his hand. He stands in dark silhouette, the camera tilts upward as the riot-armored police shine flashlights in his face. His expression passes from wary hope to resignation to a forced blankness when he realizes that, although he now sees himself differently, they do not. Outside, Sam is asked to identify the gang who mugged her and killed the two policemen earlier in the evening. This culminates in the continued reification of his British

identity within the outer spaces of South London—where the police maintain a conspicuous absence and an orphaned 15-year old like Moses robs to survive. Outside, Sam is asked to identify the gang who mugged her and killed the two policemen earlier in the evening. She points to the handcuffed Moses and Pest and corrects the commanding officer, saying,

“Those boys over there, the ones you’re arresting, I know them. They’re my neighbors. They protected me.”

Joe Cornish turns the discursively devalued city space of *Attack the Block* to redemptive ends by associating the gang’s localized speech with the film’s shooting location and the characteristic design of high-rise public housing in Britain. He says it is a

“South London thing where kids actually pronounce all the vowels and consonants a bit more than they do in North London. In some films, tower blocks and estates are presented as these symbols of urban decay but we tried to do something different with this film and make the block into a sci-fi playground.”[25]

His explicit reference to social realism within a framework of science fiction—a genre in which the Other is traditionally a literal monster—distinguishes truly alien blackness—cinematically enhanced by visual effects so the monsters do not reflect light—from non-white British citizenship. In a study (2000) of young UK working-class and multiracial residents of public housing, researchers found that what the kids value most is “being known.”[26] Early in *Attack the Block* the camera pans across a brick wall at the periphery of the estate where the names of the teens we are about to meet are written in a tight cluster of graffiti. The outer spaces of South London are thus inscribed by its inner-city youth—now *seen*, *known*, *named*—in parallel with the cinematic rewriting of concrete brutalism as urban community.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Attack the Block: a visual essay of the film



Attack the Block: As the alien invasion begins, the teens take action around the exterior of the council estate...



...on bikes and mopeds, using the elevated walkways...



...shot from ground level as well as...



...through deep vertical space from above, creating sharp diagonals...



...and kinetic trajectories of motion, activating the space of the marginal city...



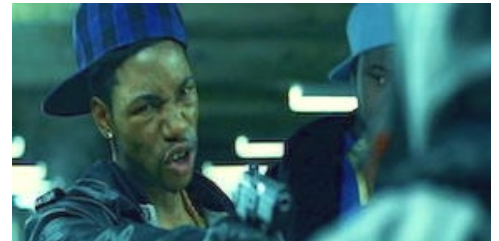
...in three dimensions, as Moses and his gang navigate the familiar territory of the estate in order to escape the pursuing monsters.



Not the *Banlieue 13* brand of *parkour*, but it works. Biggz (Simon Howard) has only ever bragged about trying this but here has to do it for real, leaping from a walkway down to the steps below with an alien on his heels.



Moses is arrested by the police who...



...like Hi-Hatz (Jumayne Hunter), imagine they have control of the tower block, unaware of (or unconcerned about) the alien invasion.



As the teens run to their flats to gather up weapons, we see the warm interiors of these residential spaces and get a sense of their familial support. Here Pest (Alex Esmail)



...while Jerome (Leeon Jones) grabs up a long-bladed knife from his bedroom and...



...Biggz promises his mother to be home in 10 minutes as...

passes by his grandmother with a baseball bat inside his coat and an arsenal of fireworks in his backpack...



...Dennis (Franz Drameh) leaves his flat with a samurai sword and, at his father's insistence, the family dog, Pogo (RIP).



Moses and his friends, along with Sam, take brief refuge with a group of young women who work together to kill the attacking monsters with a flurry of improvised weapons (wielding a particularly effective ice skate blade) when they crash through the window.



In *Attack the Block*, the masked hooded teenagers of South London public housing initially seems to fit negative media stereotypes, but simultaneously (and cinematically) evoke outlaws and ninjas.



The tower block is equipped with timed light switches at the end of every corridor that give a resident a brief window of illumination to reach their door.



Director Cornish uses multiple corridor scenes advancing or receding the light, to allow us a clearer perspective of the gang or to convey the darkening sensation of encroaching threat. Here, the gang moves toward the camera, bringing the light while...



...darkness is about to engulf Sam before she decides to return to Moses and his friends and join with them.



Inside Sam's flat, alliances are formed, where being known inside the block enables survival through community.



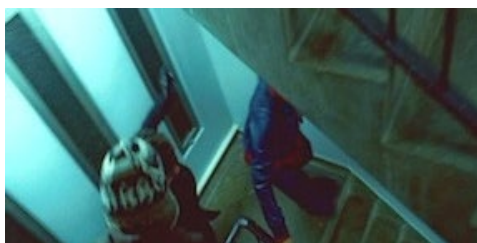
The teens use their knowledge of the tower block's design, navigating through elevators...



...corridors...



...and stairwells...



...to elude the pursuing monsters and to strategize a plan of attack.



Sword in hand, with Sam and Brewis (Luke Treadaway) behind him, Moses leads the way. As part of his preparation to play Moses, actor John Boyega watched...



...season 4 of HBO's *The Wire* (2002-2008), taking note especially of Michael Lee (Tristan Wild).



Moses apologizes to Sam for the night's earlier mugging. She is having none of it.



Moses studies the female alien, her pheromones on his clothing now visible in the UV light of Ron's weed room. He devises a plan to lead her male cohort into an ambush, therefore taking responsibility for bringing the invasion into the block and endangering his friends and neighbors.



Sam attempts to convince Moses not to leave the weed room. On the other side of the door are a dozen deep-black alien predators but...



...he does it anyway as he...



...straps the dead female alien to his back and with sword in hand, prepares to make a run for it...



...as Pest fires rockets into the mass of black monsters, Moses leaps over them and...



...hits the wall at the top of the stairwell, with glowing fangs biting at him from behind.



Joe Cornish calls this Moses' "hero run" as...



...Moses leads the monsters through the interior spaces of the tower block.



After setting off a gas explosion in his kitchen and incinerating the last of the alien invaders, Moses leaps out the window, grasping the Union Jack—his flag—as he hangs from his balcony.



Under the light of the police helicopter, Moses pulls himself up by the flag as...



...his shocked neighbors look up at him from below.



The police finally enter the war zone, finding Moses in the bloody lift.



Still unaware of the alien presence in the tower block, they assume he is behind the evening's deadly events.



Moses is taken out to a waiting police van, while his community strongly disagrees...



Pest: "Moses saved the planet. He saved the planet from alien invasion. He's a hero. He's a legend!"



Biggz: "Hey, why do you always arrest the wrong people? Moses is a hero. Don't you get it? He saved the block."



Sam: "Those boys over there, the ones you're arresting, I know them. They're my neighbors. They protected me."



Crowd: "Moses! Moses!"



Inside the police van, Pest: "Moses, bruv, can you hear that? That's for you, man."

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Notes

1. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), page 97. [[return to page 1](#)]
2. Council estates are government-built public housing.
3. “Joe Cornish on Attack the Block,” *Short List*, <http://www.shortlist.com/entertainment/films/joe-cornish-on-attack-the-block>.
4. Michel de Certeau, p. 140.
5. Bonfire Night, or Guy Fawkes Night, is celebrated in Great Britain every November 5 to commemorate the event in which a plot to blow up the British Parliament and kill King James I in 1605 was foiled. Fireworks, bonfires, and effigies of the chief plotter, Guy Fawkes, are part of the festivities.
5. *Attack the Block*, DVD Commentary, 2011.
7. Publically funded by a central government and local councils, New Towns in the UK were developed in the green belts of cheap land around urban centers to house middle- or working-class residents moving out of the cities or to alleviate urban overcrowding. The “garden city” ideal of low population density and livable space drove the concept of these suburban developments. In the UK, New Towns were primarily built between the 1940s-1960s, originally established to help rebuild post-war Britain through these semi-rural housing projects.
8. Reyner Banham, “The New Brutalism,” *October* 136 (Spring 2011), page 21.
9. James Donald, “The City, The Cinema: Modern Spaces,” *Visual Culture*, Ed. by Chris Jenks (London: Routledge, 1995), page 89.
10. Miles Glendinning and Stefan Muthesius, *Tower Block: Modern Public Housing in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), page 310.
11. Andrew Burke, “Concrete Universality: Tower Blocks, Architectural Modernism, and Realism in Contemporary British Cinema” *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 5.3 (November 2007), page 179.
12. Hugh Muir, “Deliberately Demoralising,” *The Guardian* 17 May 2005, <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2005/>

[may/18/guardiansocietysupplement.politics2](http://www.guardiansocietysupplement.politics2.may/18/guardiansocietysupplement.politics2).

13. Loretta Lees, "The Urban Injustices of New Labour's 'New Urban Renewal': The Case of the Aylesbury Estate in London," *Antipode* 0.9 (2013), page 8.

14. In 2014, the residents of the Aylesbury estate enlisted the help of director, Nick Street, to shoot a video response to the grim Channel 4 ident from a decade earlier. Christopher Beanland describes it:

"The upbeat film follows the same trajectory as the original ident, but shows a selection of happy residents, representing the estate's many ethnic communities, playing and chatting. The buildings appear cleaner and better kept. It evokes pleasantly propagandist state-funded films of the past such as *Living At Thamesmead* and the Milton Keynes Red Balloon advert – both of which used social realism to portray everyday people as heroes making the best use of estates and new towns."

See his article, "Channel 4's Aylesbury estate ident gets a revamp – starring the residents," at *The Guardian* 14 March 2014, along with link to both videos here:

<http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2014/mar/14/channel-4-aylesbury-estate-ident-revamped>.

15. Charlotte Benstead, "South London estate residents hit back over negative Channel 4 images," *The Guardian* 23 January 2014,

<http://www.theguardian.com/housing-network/2014/jan/23/south-london-aylesbury-estate-channel-4-campaign-ident>

16. Peter Travers, "Attack the Block," *Rolling Stone* 28 July 2011,

<http://www.rollingstone.com/movies/reviews/attack-the-block-20110728>.

17. Sarah Illott, "'We are the martyrs, you're just squashed tomatoes!': Laughing through the Fears in Postcolonial British Comedy: Chris Morris's *Four Lions* and Joe Cornish's *Attack the Block*," *Postcolonial Text* 8.2 (2013), page 3. [[return to page 2](#)]

18. Kenneth Chan, "The Construction of Black Identity in Black Action Films of the Nineties," *Cinema Journal* 37.2 (Winter 1998), page 43.

19. Alice Coleman, "Design Influences in Blocks of Flats," *The Geographical Journal* 150.3 (November 1984), page 351.

20. *Attack the Block*, DVD Commentary, 2011.

21. *Attack the Block*, DVD Commentary, 2011.

22. *Attack the Block*, DVD Commentary, 2011.

23. Kofi Outlaw, review of *Attack the Block*, 30 July 2011 *Screen Rant*, 22 February 2014,

<http://screenrant.com/attack-the-block-reviews-kofi-126132/>.

24. *Attack the Block*, DVD Commentary, 2011.

25. *Attack the Block*, DVD Commentary, 2011.

26. Diane Reay and Helen Lucey, “I Don’t Really Like It Here but I Don’t Want to be Anywhere Else’: Children and Inner City Council Estates,” *Antipode* 32.4 (2000), page 422.

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Class warfare in the *RoboCop* films

by [Milo Sweedler](#)



Paul Verhoeven's 1987 *RoboCop* offers a sharp critique of the nascent neoliberalism of the Reagan era.



José Padilha's 2014 remake of *RoboCop* endorses the flourishing neoliberal order of the twenty-first century.

José Padilha's 2014 remake of *RoboCop* tells us as much about the current state of class relations as Paul Verhoeven's 1987 film of the same title tells us about labor relations during the Reagan era. Both of these films function as barometers of the socio-economic relations of their times. But whereas the first *RoboCop* offers a sharp critique of nascent neoliberalism, the Padilha remake endorses the flourishing neoliberal order of the twenty-first century.

Padilha's endorsement of triumphant neoliberalism is not entirely unequivocal. The 2014 *RoboCop* invites us to come to our own conclusions about the social and political issues it raises. However, I argue, the apparently fair and balanced approach that *RoboCop* 2014 adopts, enables the film to promote all the more effectively the neoliberal agenda of privatization and corporatization that Verhoeven's film critiqued more than a quarter of a century earlier. In sum, I argue, both *RoboCop* films engage in ideological class warfare, but they take opposite sides.

In order to gauge the difference between the two films, I begin with a summary of the main plotline of Verhoeven's 1987 film, sparingly adding commentary



Lewis and Murphy, the central couple in Verhoeven's *RoboCop*, will undergo a radical transformation in Padilha's remake.



Murphy's signature gesture of twirling his gun begins the last sequence in which we see him alive as a flesh-and-blood human being in Verhoeven's *RoboCop*.

and providing socio-historical context along the way. I pay particular attention in this plot summary to the ways the original *RoboCop* movie critiques the neoliberal politics of its day and to its interweaving of a narrative of class struggle with a story of cops fighting criminals.

I then offer an overview of salient changes from one version of *RoboCop* to the other, culminating in a comparative analysis of the two films' opening narrative sequences. This comparison leads me to an examination of the various strategies that the Padilha film adopts to *avoid* the subject of class antagonism, and the ways that these strategies reflect or promote the prevailing neoliberal position on the issue of class. I conclude with an analysis of the films' contrasting portrayals of capital's principle ideological vehicle, the media, and the very different uses to which they put these portrayals.

Set in a near-future Detroit, Verhoeven's 1987 *RoboCop* recounts the story of Alex Murphy (Peter Weller), a police officer who is shot to pieces in the line of duty during a raid that he and his partner Anne Lewis (Nancy Allen) conduct on a criminal gang in an abandoned factory in Old Detroit. Murphy is, for all intents and purposes, dead. Attempts to revive him fail, and the medics operating on him ultimately "call it," pronouncing him dead.

Murphy's death is due in part, the 1987 film suggests, to a lack of police backup, which the precinct is unable to provide to Lewis and Murphy due to a shortage of manpower. This shortage of manpower is, in turn, at least partially the result of a reduction of the police labor force, which has decreased since Omni Consumer Products (OCP), a private mega-corporation, has taken over the Detroit Police Department and begun running it like a for-profit business.



Murphy's execution-style murder provides the Omni Consumer Products corporation with raw material for its cyborg law-enforcement program in Verhoeven's *RoboCop*.



"Let's call it," the medics operating on Murphy say in Verhoeven's *RoboCop*, pronouncing him dead.

Murphy's death is more than just a byproduct of corporate restructuring. We learn early in the film that OCP has been moving a lot of officers from various Detroit precincts to the notoriously dangerous precinct of Metro West. Murphy is one of those transfers. The implication, we infer from later developments in the film, is that OCP is intentionally putting officers with profiles like Murphy's in dangerous situations in the aim of generating raw material for a new cyborg law-enforcement program that the Security Concepts division of OCP is researching. When a colleague at Security Concepts asks the team leader Bob Morton (Miguel Ferrer) when they can begin developing their cyborg cop, Morton responds: "As soon as some schmuck volunteers." The film then cuts immediately to a shot of Murphy twirling his gun, beginning the last sequence in which we see him alive as a flesh-and-blood human being.

An essential component in OCP's efforts to cut costs and increase profits is its plan to replace the men and women of the police force with efficient, reliable, and cost-effective machines. This replacement of human labor with mechanized



Screenwriter Edward Neumeier says in the audio commentary on the Criterion DVD of *RoboCop* 1987 that “the old man is modeled after Reagan,” adding that “the corporate boardroom is slightly modeled after the Reagan White House.”



U.S. President Ronald Reagan is one of the most important figures in the “neoliberal revolution” that swept across the globe during the 1980s.



“We’ve gambled in markets usually regarded as nonprofit,” says OCP senior president Dick Jones at a corporate board meeting, giving almost a dictionary definition of neoliberalism.

labor is a topical 1980s subject. The Reagan era marks the beginning of a major shift from human resources to technological resources in both the private and public sectors. This shift is still taking place, accounting in no small measure for the rise in unemployment and underemployment, and the concomitant fall in real wages, documented in books like David Harvey’s *Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Tavis Smiley and Cornel West’s *The Rich and the Rest of Us*, and Thomas Piketty’s *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*.

In Verhoeven’s *RoboCop*, the need for efficient and reliable law enforcement is urgent, according to the avuncular “old man” at OCP (Dan O’Herlihy), the company’s top executive, in order to protect the million workers who will begin building Delta City, the conglomeration of interconnected skyscrapers that OCP plans to build on the site of Old Detroit. We have here a perfect dovetailing of means and ends: OCP wants to privatize a public service so that they can convert the public space of the city into private property. If, as Harvey writes, “the corporatization, commodification, and privatization of hitherto public assets has been a signature feature of the neoliberal project,” OCP would be a model neoliberal corporation (*Brief History* 160).

OCP senior president Dick Jones (Ronny Cox), second in command at the corporation, offers a justification for the company’s takeover of the Detroit Police Department that sounds almost like dictionary definition of neoliberalism:

“Take a close look at the track record of this company. You’ll see that we’ve gambled in markets usually regarded as nonprofit. Hospitals. Prisons. Space exploration. I say, good business is where you find it.”

Harvey’s 2005 characterization of neoliberalism’s primary objective alters only slightly Jones’s rationale. Harvey writes,

“Its primary aim has been to open up new fields for capital accumulation in domains hitherto regarded as off-limits to the calculus of profitability” (*Brief History* 160).

When we learn, midway through film, that Jones is the mastermind behind Detroit’s most powerful crime gang, the message is therefore clear: main-street crime is a manifestation of Wall Street crime.

The film insists on the link between capitalism and the criminality countless times. One of the gang members justifies spending stolen money on cocaine as “capital investment.” In order to clarify what he means, the business-savvy gangster offers an explanation that sounds like a paraphrase of Mack the Knife’s suggestion, in Bertolt Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera*, that founding a bank is a better way to steal money than robbing one: “No better way to steal than free enterprise.”[1][[open endnotes in new window](#)] One could multiply examples of this sort. The film repeatedly undermines the neoliberal rhetoric about the beneficial “trickle down” effects of unfettered capitalism. Free-market capitalism is the cause of the city’s problems in Verhoeven’s *RoboCop*, not their solution.

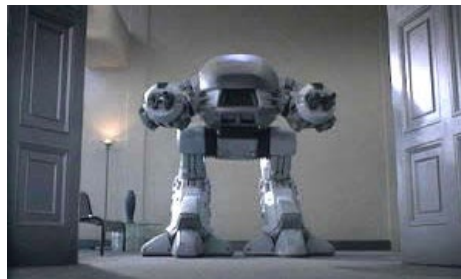
In a speech that acknowledges the suffering that OCP has caused to Detroit’s community services (in particular, to law enforcement), the distinguished old man of the company proposes to “give something back.” This high-minded



Emil's affirmation that there is "no better way to steal than free enterprise" echoes the suggestion in Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* that founding a bank is a better way to steal money than robbing one.

rhetoric about corporate responsibility rings hollow the moment the old man unveils the gift he plans to offer to the embattled police force. What he has in mind is the ED-209 law-enforcement droid, "a 24-hour-a-day police officer, a cop who doesn't need to eat or sleep, a cop with superior firepower and the reflexes to use it." This is a funny way to heal wounds, by dealing a crippling blow to the injured party.

ED-209 is Jones's pet project. Unfortunately, the droid malfunctions horribly during a demonstration, unloading dozens of rounds of bullets into a hapless OCP executive. Taking advantage of this "glitch" in the ED-209 program, the young and ambitious Morton seizes the opportunity to promote his cyborg-cop project. Much to Jones's displeasure, the old man, concerned about the loss of profit that the ED-209 setback will cost the company, gives Morton the green light to go to prototype. Morton and his team then proceed with "total body prosthesis" of Murphy's lifeless body, replacing nearly every part of his body with mechanical parts, wiping out his memory, and programming him with a set of directives.



The avuncular old man's high-minded rhetoric about corporate responsibility rings hollow the moment he unveils the gift he plans to offer to the embattled police force.



Due to a "glitch" in the ED-209 program, the droid unloads countless rounds of ammunition into the hapless Mr. Kinney for a full 30 seconds of screen time in Verhoeven's *RoboCop*.

As might be expected in a post-*Blade Runner* sci-fi film of this sort, parts of Murphy's memory survive. Fragmented memories of his wife and son, and images of Murphy's execution-style murder, haunt the cyborg. Prompted by one of these flashbacks, RoboCop returns to the Murphys' now vacant house, where he visualizes scenes from his former life as he walks from room to room. During this tour, a virtual real estate agent on a computer monitor relentlessly enumerates the property's amenities, informing the visitor that this "one-family house built by *ZM Industries* [...] has a growth factor of seven," that "this kitchen by *Food Concepts* makes everything a snap," and so forth. The scene ends with Robo-Murphy putting his fist through the computer screen, much to the spectator's satisfaction.



A virtual real estate agent relentlessly enumerates the property's amenities as Robo-Murphy walks through his former home in Verhoeven's *RoboCop*.

The robot cop then tracks down the gang that killed Murphy. His investigations lead him to Detroit crime boss Clarence Boddicker (Kurtwood Smith) and, through Boddicker, ultimately to Jones, who has a mutually beneficial business relationship with the gang boss. The Omni executive arranged for Boddicker to kill his OCP rival Morton, and he now charges him with the destruction of RoboCop. With Morton and his "bastard creation" (as Jones calls it) out of the way, the senior executive could resume production of the ED-209 droid on the pretense of protecting the million people working on the construction of Delta City. At the same time, Jones explains, Boddicker would be able to benefit from the presence of "a million workers living in trailers" on the Delta City site. Jones expounds,

“That means drugs, gambling, prostitution. Virgin territory for the man who knows how to open up new markets.”

Boddicker responds to this proposition by repeating the phrase that Jones uses to characterize OCP’s neoliberal project:

“Good business is where you find it.”

In the final scene of the film, RoboCop bursts into an OCP board meeting to confront Jones. However, as he already knows from a previous attempt to bring Jones to justice, the cyborg is unable to arrest the company president due to “directive 4,” a classified directive built into his cyborg brain that prohibits him from arresting a senior OCP executive. It is only when the old man, whom Jones has taken as a hostage at this point, fires Jones that RoboCop is no longer impeded by directive 4 from acting against Jones. The cyborg cop then gives Jones what the Criterion DVD calls “Dick’s 9mm severance package,” sending him out of a window of the OCP boardroom in a shower of bullets.



Robo-Murphy punches the computer screen, much to the spectator’s satisfaction.



Robo-Murphy gives Jones his “9mm severance package,” sending him out of a window of the OCP boardroom in a shower of bullets at the end of Verhoeven’s *RoboCop*.



Sergeant Reed argues with a group of officers who are organizing a strike against OCP in Verhoeven’s *RoboCop*.

As this narrative of super cops, crime bosses, and corporate criminals unfolds, the Detroit Police Department (DPD) engages in political action against OCP in order to protect their rights as workers and to maintain a modicum of job security. Throughout the film we see and hear (or hear about) members of the DPD discussing their situation, holding a strike vote, and going on strike. This explicitly political narrative, which runs in parallel to the story of RoboCop’s adventures, begins to develop in the opening narrative sequence of the film, when a cop in the police station, overhearing a fellow officer mention OCP, opines:

“Omni Consumer Products. What a bunch of morons. They’re gonna manage this department right into the ground. [...] I’ll tell you what we should do. We should strike. Fuck ’em.”

The precinct sergeant overhears these remarks and tries to quell any discussion of a strike, but he is clearly unable to control his subordinates. By the end of the film the entire DPD, with the exception of RoboCop (who cannot strike because he is a product, not an employee, of OCP) and Lewis (who stands by her partner), has walked off the job.

As this synopsis shows, Verhoeven’s *RoboCop* intertwines two narrative threads. On the one hand, cops are fighting criminals. On the other hand, a group of unionized municipal employees is battling against a mega-corporation that has privatized a hitherto public service and is attempting to make the workers redundant by replacing them with machines. The film superimposes these two narratives on one another: one staging a showdown between capital



In an understated tongue-in-cheek commentary on corporate culture, Verhoeven has the entrance to the executive lounge at OCP lead directly into the men’s washroom.



Another tongue-in-cheek critique of corporate culture appears in the form of ticker feeds above the urinals in the “executive lounge” of OCP.

and labor, and another depicting a battle between cops and robbers. Not only does the film identify capitalists with criminals (and vice-versa). The employees who take on the mega-corporation are also the same cops who are battling the criminal underworld. By encouraging us to side with the crime fighters, the film urges us to side with the striking workers at the same time.

In the audio commentary on the Criterion DVD of the 1987 *RoboCop*, producer Jon Davison calls the film “fascism for liberals.” I find this slogan misleading. It suggests that the film appeals to lefty-liberals but gives them a spectacle of violence in the place of an emancipatory political narrative. But the film is clearly marketed to fans of action movies. The trailers show numerous images of cars skidding, guns shooting, buildings bursting into flames, and people crashing through windows. They do not give the slightest hint of the film’s politics. A spectator watching the preview would have no idea that the film has a political message beyond a vague *tough on crime* agenda. Rather than “fascism for liberals,” I would characterize the film as “anti-capitalism for conservatives.” It promises violence and excitement, which it delivers, giving us a resounding critique of neoliberal capitalism in the process. Verhoeven’s *RoboCop* is a powerful piece of ideological propaganda in the class war against the rich, recruiting the unconverted (or the not necessarily converted) spectator to the anti-capitalist cause.



The standoff between Dick Jones, the reptilian senior vice president of OCP, and his rival, the opportunistic yuppie Bob Morton, is emblematic of Verhoeven’s portrait of corporate capitalism.



“Good business is where you find it,” says Detroit crime boss Clarence Boddicker to characterize his endeavors, repeating Dick Jones’s characterization of OCP’s neoliberal project in Verhoeven’s *RoboCop*.

Padilha’s 2014 remake of *RoboCop* changes virtually every significant narrative and thematic element of the original *RoboCop* story. Perhaps the most obvious of these changes is the relation between the police officer that we see at the beginning of the movie and the robot cop he later becomes. As we have seen, in the first film, Murphy dies and comes back to life as RoboCop. In Padilha’s remake, by contrast, Murphy (Joel Kinnaman) does not die. He remains Alex Murphy throughout the film. His memories, values, aesthetic tastes (he likes Frank Sinatra), and affective attachments all remain intact. This narrative change has the effect of enabling us to identify with Robo-Murphy in ways that the first film does not. Verhoeven’s film urges us to *side* with RoboCop more than to identify with him. This distinction might seem subtle, but it is key to understanding the difference between the two films.



Verhoeven’s *RoboCop* moves with the agility of *Star Wars*’ C-3PO.

In conjunction with the change in Murphy’s post-injury character, Padilha reconfigures the cyborg hero’s physical appearance, rendering him less robotic and more dynamic. Verhoeven’s *RoboCop* moves with the agility of *Star Wars*’ C-3PO and speaks with the eloquence of the robot from the 1960s sci-fi TV show *Lost in Space*. Padilha’s cyborg is a kinetic superhero that leaps through space like the hero of Sam Raimi’s *Spider-Man* and talks alternately like a street-

smart cop and a loving and tender husband.



Padilha's remake encourages us to identify with the cyborg cop in ways that the first film does not.



Padilha's dynamic cyborg leaps through space like a kinetic superhero.

The tender-and-loving-husband part is almost entirely Padilha's invention. In the first film, Murphy's wife and son appear as stock characters in brief flashbacks. In the remake, Clara and David Murphy (Abbie Cornish and John Paul Ruttan) become major characters with psychological depth. Unfortunately, in order to communicate this depth, Padilha reverts to clichéd images of stereotypical gender roles, presented via hackneyed cinematic techniques (close-ups of Clara's tear-streaked face, insidious piano music designed solely to jerk tears, and so forth). Ironically, the 30-odd minutes of screen time that Padilha dedicates to developing the relationship between Murphy and his family are significantly less memorable than the two or three minutes that Verhoeven dedicates to RoboCop's memories of his former life with his wife and son in the first film.

The large amount of screen time dedicated to the relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Murphy in the new film compensates in a way for another significant change that Padilha makes to the original story: the transformation of Murphy's partner, Anne Lewis, into Jack Lewis (Michael K. Williams). Murphy and Jack interact like characters in a buddy movie, while the relationship between the hero and the main female character is transposed onto the married couple.



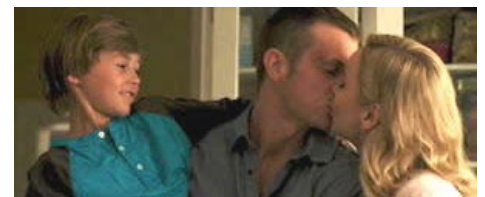
In Verhoeven's *RoboCop*, Murphy's wife and son appear as stock characters in brief flashbacks.



Ironically, the few brief appearances of Murphy's wife in Verhoeven's *RoboCop* are more memorable than the 30-odd minutes of screen time that Padilha dedicates to Clara in the remake.



Close-ups of Clara's tear-streaked face figure among the hackneyed cinematic techniques that Padilha uses to communicate the character's psychological depth.



The Padilha remake dedicates a great deal of screen time to developing a family-values subplot that is virtually non-existent in the original *RoboCop* story.

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Lewis gently puts her hand on her partner's arm in order to help him recalibrate his aim in Verhoeven's *RoboCop*.



It is hard to miss the irony of Robo-Murphy's choice of target when Lewis helps him get his targeting back on track.



Verhoeven's meandering long takes give the viewer a sense of spatial and temporal continuity.

The two films offer sharply contrasting images of their central male-female pair. Although Verhoeven's Lewis and Murphy clearly care for one another, the last scene of them alone together shatters any illusions we might have had of them uniting as a couple. While preparing for the final shootout with Boddicker's gang, Lewis gently puts her hand on her partner's arm in order to help him recalibrate his aim. On the one hand, we feel the tenderness of her gesture. On the other, it is hard to miss the irony of Murphy's choice of target. Lewis helps train her partner's gun on three jars of baby food adorned with smiling cherubic faces, which explode one by one as Murphy picks them off. The scene "produces a spectacle rarely seen in Hollywood films: a man and a woman teaming up not to produce a baby, but to blow that image away" (Burgett 175). Suffice it so say that we are far removed here from the family-values subplot that Padilha develops.

One of the most revealing changes in the remake is the depiction of the mega-corporation, which metamorphoses from the predatory OCP of the first film into the much more sympathetically portrayed OmniCorp. In contrast to Verhoeven's OCP, Padilha's OmniCorp does not take over the DPD, has no plans to privatize downtown Detroit, has nothing to do with Murphy's mutilation, and has no connection to organized crime. The replacement of Dick Jones, the reptilian senior president of OCP, with the bright and genial Raymond Sellars (Michael Keaton), the CEO of OmniCorp, reflects the overall change of the corporation from one film to the other. Jones's rival at OCP, the opportunistic yuppie Bob Morton, vanishes from the new film along with his sidekick, Johnson. In their place appear Liz Kline, legal counsel for OmniCorp, and Tom Pope, Director of Marketing, whose only visible character flaws are their company loyalty, their competence, and their professionalism. Every scene of Sellars and his two associates shows the group working collaboratively in an atmosphere of solidarity, cooperation, and mutual respect.

This is not to say that Padilha and Co. abandon the themes of corruption, infighting, back-stabbing, and the murderous ends to which people go in order to eliminate their rivals. They simply displace these themes from the mega-corporation onto the police department. This displacement constitutes, in my view, the most significant single narrative change that Padilha and screenwriter Joshua Zetumer make to the original story.

The re-conception of the image of the DPD appears from the opening narrative sequence of Padilha's film. This sequence also gives us our first glimpse of the "new and improved" Murphy, preparing us for his subsequent metamorphosis into a full metal superhero, while offering a fine example of Padilha's narrative technique. In order to appreciate these aspects of Padilha's film, and the ways that they differ from the original *RoboCop*, let us compare and contrast the opening narrative sequences of the two films.

Following a helicopter shot of downtown Detroit, a "media break" to which I return below, and an establishing shot that locates us at the Detroit Metro West police station, Verhoeven's *RoboCop* begins with a long steadycam shot that follows various figures around the crowded Metro West station. We hear the ambient noises of the busy station and see dozens of officers interacting with the scores of people hanging around the precinct's crowded main hall. The camera comes to rest on Sergeant Warren Reed (Robert DoQui) and two



Murphy appears as an awkward outsider when he first enters the animated Metro West precinct hall at the beginning of Verhoeven's *RoboCop*.



Murphy's blue patterned shirt, buttoned up to the top, gives him a nerdy look in Verhoeven's *RoboCop*.



Verhoeven presents the police precinct's unisex locker room as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

lawyers as they stop in the middle of the station hall to argue about an inmate's rights. It then pans left to follow the two lawyers to the door, where it picks up a thin, nerdy-looking guy, who enters the station as the lawyers exit. The nerdy-looking guy walks into a close-up as he approaches the main desk in the center of the hall and introduces himself to the sergeant: "Murphy, transferring in from Metro South."

After a brief exchange between Murphy and Reed, the camera continues to follow various figures around the precinct, taking us from the main hall of the station into the back corridors, the showers, and the locker room. We overhear snippets of conversation about problems that officers face on the job, the deterioration of their working conditions, and their dissatisfaction with the way OCP is running the department. But it is the *mise-en-scène*, especially as we move into the locker room, that I find particularly striking in these shots. Verhoeven presents the precinct's unisex locker room as though it were the most natural thing in the world, not even worthy of comment. Women change clothes (and presumably shower) alongside men, and no one seems to find this the slightest bit awkward or unusual. I can think of no other mainstream Hollywood sci-fi or action film that presents male and female partial frontal nudity (from the waist up) so nonchalantly.

The overall impression one has of the police precinct from the 1987 film's opening narrative sequence is one of solidarity and camaraderie. We learn that the officers face difficult challenges, but we also sense that they face these challenges together, that they look out for one another, and that they treat each other as equals.

The comparable scenes in the 2014 remake make an entirely different impression on the viewer. Here, we enter with a beefed-up Murphy into an "open concept" office space, with cops staring into computer screens on their cubicle desks.

The sequence begins with a close-up of Murphy's hands pushing on a crash bar as he swaggers into the office to the musical accompaniment of the invigorating *RoboCop* theme. We then follow the super cop (who already seems like a super cop) from behind in a medium close-up that places his broad shoulders in the center of the frame. He responds to greetings from his colleagues with short, one-or-two-word replies as he moves coolly and deliberately past his fellow officers to an office at the back of the room. In contrast to Verhoeven's Murphy, who is presented as an awkward outsider, Padilha's Murphy is an insider that everybody knows. Most of all, he is *cool*, an embodiment of the strong and silent masculine hero.

However, the biggest transformation in this opening sequence occurs when Murphy arrives at the office at the back of the room. There, he barges into a meeting between Police Chief Karen Dean (Marianne Jean-Baptiste) and two detectives, who are discussing a recent incident that put Murphy's partner in the hospital. Chief Dean asks Murphy what happened, but he refuses to talk in front of the detectives because, he says, they "gotta be either dumb or dirty." They turn out to be dirty (i.e., corrupt), and so does Dean.

Dean asks the two officers to leave, which they do, and Murphy tells the chief what happened: "So, me and Jack, we been doin' some street buys. We get a line on some guns." The image track then cuts from Dean's office to the scene of the action, where the story unfolds in flashback. "We come across this low-level G called Jerry who has a piece he's not supposed to have," Murphy recounts as we see a street gangster show an automatic rifle to the two undercover cops. The audio track then catches up with the image track as the on-screen Murphy asks Jerry where the hell he got a gun like that.



Padilha's rugged and super-cool Murphy swaggers through the police station to the musical accompaniment of the invigorating *RoboCop* theme at the beginning of the remake.



Using a narrative device that recurs frequently in the film, Padilha intercuts shots of Murphy recounting the story of Jack's injury to Chief Dean with images of the scene unfolding in flashback.



"We come across this low-level G called Jerry who has a piece he's not supposed to have," we hear Padilha's Murphy say to Chief Dean as we see the scene unfold in flashback.



In Padilha's *RoboCop*, the narrative of the encounter with Vallon's gang concludes with a melodramatic vertical crane shot of Murphy and Jack lit by a powerful spotlight. The camera slowly mounts skyward as rain pours down onto the two partners.

Using a narrative strategy that recurs frequently in the film, the sequence continues to shift between spoken narration and direct representations of the action. The fast-paced sequence alternately (or simultaneously) tells and shows how the two cops set up an undercover sting operation on Antoine Vallon (Patrick Garrow), the generic bad guy that replaces the creepy Boddicker of the first film. The sting would have succeeded had not someone—the two corrupt detectives working in conjunction with Chief Dean, we learn later—tipped off Vallon. The narrative concludes with a vertical crane shot of Murphy trying to revive his partner, who was gunned down in a shootout between the two cops and Vallon's henchmen. The sequence then ends with a brief return to Dean's office, where the chief chastises Murphy for operating beyond his jurisdiction.



The police strike that begins in Verhoeven's *RoboCop* continues in *RoboCop 2*, Irvin Kershner's 1990 sequel to the first film.

As this opening narrative sequence suggests, the Padilha film eliminates the conflict between the DPD and OCP, replacing it with an internal conflict within the police force. This new conflict structures the film as a whole, much like the battle between capital and labor structures Verhoeven's film. Needless to say, this narrative change radically transforms the film's ideological message. Whereas the 1987 film depicts a group of public servants working in common cause against the forces of private capital, the new *RoboCop* displaces the battle between striking workers and their corporate bosses onto a fight between good cops and bad cops. The narrative of class struggle becomes a story of police corruption.

In conjunction with the shift away from the narrative of class struggle, the image of the cops changes dramatically from one film to the next. Neither



In contrast to Verhoeven's 1987 film, where the police force as a whole engages in battle against their neoliberal corporate bosses, in the 2014 remake, officers wage war against their co-workers.



Padilha's fast-paced editing and hand-held camera work create a sense of immediacy and urgency, but they also produce a sense of temporal and spatial confusion.



Padilha's jerky camera movements, racking focus, and fast cutting style resemble the narrative techniques used in the *Bourne* films, which erode the spectator's sense of historical time.

during the opening sequence nor at any other time in the film does the new *RoboCop* present the cops as *workers*. In the first film, the police stand in metonymically for labor as such. Their struggle against OCP condenses resistance to the brutal onslaught on organized labor that took place under Reagan into a set of recognizable images. The Padilha film, by contrast, presents the DPD as a distinct subculture cut off from mainstream society. The cops speak in an esoteric street jargon ("We come across this low-level G called Jerry who has a piece he's not supposed to have," for example), and they face problems that are unique to their profession. The idea that these cops belong to the labor force, much less that they could plausibly engage in the sort of political action that their counterparts undertake in Verhoeven's film, does not occur to us.

Padilha's film style also has an ideological dimension. In contrast to Verhoeven, whose meandering long takes give the viewer a sense of spatial and temporal continuity, Padilha opts for fast-paced editing and hand-held camera work. These narrative techniques create a sense of immediacy and urgency, but they also produce a sense of spatial and temporal disorientation. They resemble the narrative techniques that Doug Liman and Paul Greengrass use in the *Bourne* films, which pitch the viewer, along with the hero, into a "vertiginous 'continuous present'" (Fisher 58). Mark Fisher considers the relation to time that films like the *Bourne* trilogy create, to be typical of current, advanced-capitalist experiences of time. According to Fisher, these films typify "a culture that privileges only the present and the immediate" (59). What they inhibit is both a sense of personal or historical memory and projective imaginings of the future.

Fisher cites in this context Fredric Jameson's analysis of the antimony of postmodern temporality, in which "an unparalleled rate of change on all levels of social life" coexists with "an unparalleled standardization of everything. [...] What we now begin to feel," Fisher writes, citing Jameson, "is henceforth, where everything now submits to the perpetual change of fashion and media image, nothing can change any longer" (Jameson 15, 17-18; cited in Fisher 59). What Fisher and Jameson mean here is that no *social* change can take place in an environment where the newest gadget or the latest media trend have come to supplant other notions of progress.

The Fisher-Jameson analysis of postmodern temporality bears directly on the worldview communicated in Padilha's *RoboCop*. The vision of the future that the film transmits is one in which new products appear at a rapid rate. Sellars, for example, who promotes RoboCop as the hottest item in law enforcement towards the beginning of the film, considers the cyborg obsolete by the end of the film. Yet the film simultaneously communicates a vision of the future in which no socio-political change is possible. Padilha's elimination of the class struggle, which Karl Marx famously called "the motor of history," from the film narrative speaks volumes about *RoboCop* 2014's message. In contrast to Verhoeven's film, where the police force as a whole engages in battle against their neoliberal corporate bosses, in the remake, officers wage war against their co-workers.

Granted, already in 1987, when Verhoeven's film premiered, labor was fighting a rear guard battle. As Harvey notes, "it took less than six months in 1983 to reverse nearly 40 per cent of the decisions made during the 1970s that had been, in the view of business, too favourable to labour" (*Brief History* 52).

Reagan set the tone for the union-busting years to come when, in 1981, he fired the more than 11,000 striking air traffic controllers who ignored his orders to return to work. But in my view, this anachronistic aspect of Verhoeven's film makes his vision of the future all the more timely. The original *RoboCop* intervened on the side of labor at a time when trade unionism needed all the help it could get.

To say that labor could use this sort of support today strikes me as an understatement. The policies and practices of neoliberal capitalism inaugurated in the early 1980s have come to dominate the globe in ways unimaginable at that time. As Susan Buck-Morss writes in 2013,

“nothing—not schools, not prisons, not human genes, not wild plants, not the national army, not foreign governments—nothing is exempt from this process of privatization” (72).

At the same time, the inequality of wealth has reached its highest level since 1929, the year of the Wall Street crash. If the current trend continues, the gap between the wealthiest people in the world and the rest of the population will soon be wider than at any time in documented economic history. Thomas Piketty's monumental book on capital in the twenty-first century makes crystal clear when the current trend towards record-level inequality began: 1980, the birth year of the neoliberal revolution.[2][[open endnotes in new window](#)]



Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* shows the current trend towards record-level inequality.

An integral component of the class war that the rich wage against the rest of us is the research and development of innovative new ways for machines to do work that has traditionally been done by human beings. Already in the nineteenth century, Harvey reminds us, “Marx argued that technological innovation was a crucial weapon in class struggle and that many an innovation had been adopted by capital with the sole aim of breaking strikes” (*Seventeen Contradictions* 103). As computer technology improves and adapts to capital's needs, the work done by devices will likely soon include entire sectors that currently demand human labor, from routine services (like those that can already be seen at airline check-ins and supermarket check-outs) to highly skilled work in areas like medicine and education. Harvey writes,

“The idea that it will only be the low-paying jobs that will be eliminated and not high-paying skilled jobs (radiologists, doctors, university professors, airplane pilots and the like) is misguided. [...] Larger and larger segments of the world's population will be considered redundant and disposable from the standpoint of capital” (*Seventeen Contradictions* 105).



As computer technology improves and adapts to capital's needs, the work done by devices will likely soon include entire sectors that currently demand human labor.

The city of Detroit, where the *RoboCop* films are set, offers painful testimony to the deleterious effects of neoliberalism. “Once the nation’s richest city, Detroit is now its poorest,” writes Charlie LeDuff in 2013:

“It is the country’s illiteracy and dropout capital, where children must leave their books at school and bring toilet paper from home. It is the unemployment capital, where half of the adult population does not work at a consistent job” (LeDuff 5).

The city that *Time* magazine claimed, in 1951, best represented the spirit of modern twentieth-century United States, is today what a *New York Times* columnist calls “18 square miles of ‘America’s most severely distressed big city ghetto’” (cited in Neill 640, 651).

The causes of Detroit’s decline are numerous. As Thomas Sugrue demonstrates in his study of the origins of the urban crisis, a long history of racial discrimination in housing policies and hiring practices, combined with a steady and relentless process of deindustrialization, the introduction of labor-saving technologies in the automotive sector, and the flight of investment and jobs from Detroit as car manufacturers and suppliers “searched for cheap labor, low taxes, and lax regulations” elsewhere (xvi), contributed to Detroit’s demise. The reduction of federal urban support under Reagan further exacerbated the problem. As Detroit was hemorrhaging jobs and capital, severely eroding the city’s tax base, Reagan cut urban spending from 12% to 3% of the federal budget, resulting in a decrease in federal revenue support from 26% to 8% of the city’s budget (Sugrue xviii).

When the U.S. housing market collapsed in 2007-08, precipitating the worst international financial crisis since the Great Depression, Detroit was ill equipped to weather the storm. The Bush and Obama administrations bailed out Chrysler and General Motors, who had all but abandoned Detroit by that point, as well as the banks whose shenanigans caused the financial crisis, but they did not bail out Detroit. As a result, on July 17, 2013, the city submitted the largest municipal bankruptcy filing in U.S. history.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



The abandoned factory in Old Detroit (a Pittsburgh location, actually) functions as a symbol of postindustrial urban decay in Verhoeven's *RoboCop*.

The Detroit bankruptcy will have its winners and losers. The primary beneficiaries will be “a few wealthy businessmen who are in the position to control a large share of a burgeoning retail, real estate, and entertainment market” (Posey). Dan Gilbert, for example, the founder of Quicken Loans, who calls the Detroit bankruptcy “good news,” has been buying up property in downtown Detroit at a rapid rate (Posey). Sean Posey brings to light a project to privatize Belle Isle Park, located on the Detroit River, and turn it into a “free market utopia.”

The actions of the notorious multi-billionaire Koch brothers, who used their political advocacy group, Americans for Prosperity, to set up a web site—“No more bailouts for Detroit!”—and threatened to run ads against politicians who voted for a settlement, should perhaps come as no surprise. David Firestone comments on the Kochs,

“As they have in so many other areas of public life, two of the country’s wealthiest citizens are using their good fortune to make life far more difficult for those at the bottom of the ladder.”



Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre’s iconic photographs of Detroit’s ruins, like this one of the derelict Packard plant on Detroit’s East Side, document the plight of the Motor City.



The housing market collapse and financial crisis of 2007-08 hit Detroit particularly hard.



Padilha’s *RoboCop*, filmed largely in Toronto, does not convey a sense of the city that a *New York Times* columnist calls “America’s most severely distressed big city ghetto.”

Among those who will suffer from the bankruptcy in the immediate term are the city’s bondholders, who will see a decrease in the value of municipal bonds they hold, and government employees, whose ranks, salaries, and pensions will shrink. The plight of public sector workers in Detroit is particularly unsettling. “As Detroit deindustrialized,” Sugrue writes, “one of the city’s few bright lights was the availability of government employment” (xvii-xviii).

It is in this context that the actions of the Detroit Police Officers Association (DPOA), the city’s largest police union, become significant. In contrast to other public sector unions, which accepted the terms of the bankruptcy, the DPOA filed an objection to the Detroit bankruptcy, calling the city’s actions “cynical” (Helms). “The DPOA notes that in recent years undermanned cops have taken pay cuts and suffered low morale amid poor working conditions,” explains Matt Helms in the *Detroit Free Press*. In an unfortunate case of life imitating art, the science-fiction future portrayed in Verhoeven’s *RoboCop* is looking all too real. As screenwriter Edward Neumeier succinctly says in a recent interview, “We are

now living in the world that I was proposing in *RoboCop*” (Joy).

These recent developments make Padilha’s decision not to show the Omni corporation privatizing downtown Detroit, taking over a public service, or restructuring the police force, and his concomitant decision not to portray the DPD as a politically engaged group of municipal employees, particularly striking.

I can find only two moments in Padilha’s *RoboCop* that show an awareness of the socio-economic issues that Detroit currently faces. Both of them fly by in a matter of seconds as little bits of visual information on the edge of the frame.

The first of these moments occurs during one of the many insufferable scenes between Robo-Murphy and Clara, when she begs her cyborg husband to come home. The scene is set against the backdrop of the Detroit police station, where cops have set up barriers to keep a small group of protestors at bay. As Murphy pulls away from the station on his hotrod motorcycle to stop some crimes, leaving Clara alone in the middle of the street, we see that one of the protestors on the edge of the frame is carrying a picket sign that reads: “People need JOBS, Robots don’t.” As if to clarify that this guy is an anachronistic throwback to a bygone era, on the opposite edge of the frame, a woman holds another sign, reading: “Robots do Not Make Love!” The latter sign evokes the old Vietnam-War protest slogan, “Make love, not war,” here transformed into one of weakest arguments imaginable against automation (that is, until robots start taking the jobs of sex workers). The scene mocks the idea of social protest in general and of protest against robotics in particular.

The second scene where we can catch a critical reference to politico-economic issues occurs during a news report on the Senate vote repealing the law that prohibits the use of combat drones on U.S. soil. I will return momentarily to discuss the debate around the legality of using robots for law-enforcement purposes. For the moment, I just want to point out a headline that runs along the bottom of the screen in a ticker feed during the coverage of the Senate vote: “Inequality in America proves that Karl Marx was right, says economist John Ryan.” Although this reference to wealth inequality is a welcome nod to the macro-economic issues that the film otherwise ignores, it is both too little (I did not even catch it the first time I watched the film) and too late (it occurs $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way through the film, at which point we been subjected to an hour and a half of neoliberal spin).

As we can glean of our discussion of the 2014 film up to this point, one of the strategies that Padilha and screenwriter Joshua Zetumer adopt in the face of the inherently divisive subject of class difference is *omission*. They either ignore the problem of class, as though it did not exist, or belittle it in one way or another. This criticism might seem awfully minor, hardly worth making. The film does not take a stance on climate change, vegetarianism, or prayer in school either. I would hardly want to impute a position to the film on those subjects based on the fact that it does not address them. But given the explicitly anti-capitalist stance of its source material, *RoboCop* 2014’s omission of the narrative of class antagonism constitutes in and of itself a position on the class struggle. Padilha and Zetumer do not simply fail to bring up the issue of class; they decide to eliminate it.

Moreover, this decision mimics the neoliberal right’s own position on the subject of class. The only times one hears talk of class in the right-wing press is when someone, generally on the left, proposes some way to address the ever-widening gap between the wealth of top executives at big firms and the relative poverty of everyone else. At that point, Fox News pundits go into high gear, accusing the left of class warfare while lauding the beneficent CEOs of mega-corporations, ironically rebranded as “job creators” when downsizing is clearly



The scene in which the old man of OCP pushes Detroit into bankruptcy in Irvin Kershner’s 1990 *RoboCop 2* prefigures the actions of people like the Koch brothers in 2013.



Padilha’s *RoboCop* mocks the idea of social protest.



A ticker feed about wealth inequality in the United States is a welcome nod to the macro-economic issues that Padilha’s *RoboCop* otherwise ignores.



“There’s no class in America. [...] That’s Marxism talk,” says former US Senator Rick

Santorum at a GOP fundraiser in 2013.



Padilha's film tellingly presents Dr. Norton's ethical dilemma in a form that eliminates the socio-political dimensions of the issue.



A TV commercial in Verhoeven's *RoboCop* advertizes a luxury sedan appropriately called the 6000 SUX because it "sucks."



Leeza Gibbons and Mario Machado, two well-known news anchors at the time, play the cheerful but vacuous news presenters in Verhoeven's 1987 *RoboCop*.

the order of the day.[3] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] Otherwise, the mere suggestion that such a thing as social class exists can lead to accusations of Marxism. Former U.S. Senator Rick Santorum recently went so far as to demonize the term "middle class" on the grounds that "there's no class in America. [...] That's Marxism talk" (Reilly). In sum, although I entirely agree with Buck-Morss that "there is class warfare being waged, from the top down" (72), I would insist on the idea that an essential component of this war is the denial that it is taking place. Padilha's erasure of the narrative of class conflict from the story of *RoboCop* both reflects and promotes this neoliberal agenda.

Another strategy that Padilha and Zetumer adopt is one of *displacement*. In particular, they recast a political problem with clearly defined antagonists as an ethical dilemma with no simple solution.

Here, I must say that I am convinced by Alain Badiou's argument that the rise of the field of ethics over the past few decades, in tandem with the rise of neoliberalism, supplants as much as it supplements work on politics. Although I do not mean to belittle the important work that has been done on ethics in recent years, and I by no means wish to suggest that people who work on ethical topics necessarily harbor neoliberal sympathies, I do think that it is worth historicizing the trend, which began roughly contemporaneously with the birth of neoliberalism, around 1980, and established itself as a cultural dominant in conjunction with the triumph of global neoliberalism, about a decade later (see Badiou 4-17).

The shift from politics to ethics is palpable in numerous changes that Padilha and Zetumer make to the original *RoboCop* story. The displacement of the themes of greed and corruption from the vile corporation onto villainous cops is just one example of this shift in focus. The survival of Murphy, for example, as opposed to his death and rebirth as *RoboCop*, transforms the story of the robot cop's inhumanity, his "inability to function beyond the laws and interests of a corporation" (Litt 47), into a heroic story of self-overcoming. The creation of a new character, Dr. Dennett Norton (Gary Oldman), a prosthetist whose ethical sensibilities sometimes run counter to his boss's desire to expand OmniCorp's combat-drone program into the lucrative U.S. market, puts us in the position of a person in the throes of an ethical dilemma. The film tellingly presents Norton's dilemma in the form: Should I serve the greater good by pursuing a cyborg law-enforcement program that will save countless U.S. lives, or should I do what is best for Murphy and his family? With the question posed in these terms, the battle against corporate capitalism as such is already lost. All that remains for the film to do is to lead us to the right ethical conclusion, which it does by appealing to our emotions.

The shift from socio-political critique to emotional appeal is particularly apparent in the two films' contrasting portrayals of the media and the very different uses to which they put these portrayals. In conclusion, let us examine these contrasting representations.

In Verhoeven's film, the "media break" episodes are witty and delightful pieces of tongue-in-cheek social commentary that intersperse sound-bite-sized infotainment TV reports with commercials for such products as a family board game called "Nukem" (marketed with the tagline: "Get them before they get you!"), the new line of sports hearts by Jensen and Yamaha available at the Family Heart Center ("Remember, we care!"), and a luxury sedan appropriately called the 6000 SUX ("An American tradition, 8.2 M.P.G.") because it "sucks" (gas, at least). The jovial news anchors report on international wars, insurgent revolutions, urban crime, and an array of minor and major technological malfunctions with uniform good cheer and a big smile. The episodes are smart, funny, and clearly satirical. They work, Steven Best observes,



The *Novak Element* in Padilha's film resembles *The O'Reilly Factor*, the Fox News talk show hosted by right-wing pundit Bill O'Reilly.



The fast-paced opening sequence of Padilha's *RoboCop* moves seamlessly from the television studio of *The Novak Element* into the heart of the action.



The opening sequence of Padilha's film alternates shots of the TV film crew shooting on location in Tehran with point-of-view shots of the cameraman's footage.

"because [they] only slightly [exaggerate] what real newscasts now do—just enough to expose the artificiality of TV news codes without appearing too unbelievable."

We do not for a moment get caught up in these newscasts. On the contrary, they cultivate a critical distance that provokes reflection about how commercial television works, what it is, and why we watch it.

The Novak Element in Padilha's film has an entirely different tone and serves a radically different purpose. Like Verhoeven's media breaks, it looks uncannily like actual television programming. In particular, it strongly resembles (audio-visually, thematically, and ideologically) *The O'Reilly Factor*, the Fox News talk show hosted by right-wing pundit Bill O'Reilly. But in contrast to Verhoeven's mock TV episodes, which show us *that* network news is spin, Padilha's talk show attempts to convince us *of* its spin.

Padilha's film starts with a shot of talk-show host Pat Novak (Samuel L. Jackson) seen from behind, his head and shoulders harshly lit in silhouette by a light in his face. The camera carves a 180-degree arc around the figure as we hear an off-screen technician count down to airtime. Novak then looks up into the camera and opens the film with a short monologue:

"What if I told you that the worst neighborhood in America could be made completely safe? And what if I told you that this could be done without risking the life of one law-enforcement officer? How do I know this? Because it is happening in every country in the world except this one. Welcome to *The Novak Element*. I'm Pat Novak."

The scene proceeds to take us from the TV studio to the program as such, presented as it would appear on home television screens. From there, an internal screen opens, enabling Novak to conduct an on-screen interview with General Monroe at the Pentagon. As the general describes an ongoing mission called Operation Freedom Tehran, a new screen opens showing an aerial view of downtown Tehran, followed by an additional screen of the film crew on the ground, which enlarges to fill the film frame. The sequence then alternates between shots of the film crew shooting the scene on location in Tehran and point-of-view shots of the cameraman's footage, and then between omniscient shots of the action on the streets and hand-held, documentary-looking shots inside the home of a Tehranian family.



A crane shot takes us from the streets of Tehran, where combat droids patrol a residential district, to an aerial view of the city.



Padilha's portrayal of Iranians could be right out of Sut Jhally and Jack Shaheen's *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*.

This opening sequence is a tour de force of continuity editing, moving seamlessly from the television studio into the heart of the action. The crane shot that takes us from the streets of Tehran, where combat droids patrol a residential district, to an aerial view of the city, is breathtaking. The sequence

engages us viscerally in the film narrative, plunging us into the action. Yet in so doing, it effectively eliminates the critical distance that Verhoeven's media breaks opened up. Padilha's film does not encourage us to think about *why* the army is in Tehran. It may well be that the purported "freedom" that the U.S. military is promoting in Tehran is none other than that of the market, but the film does not bother us with these details. All we need to know is that the Iranians are bad guys, which the movie obligingly shows us in a series of shots that could be right out of *Reel Bad Arabs*, the Sut Jhally-Jack Shaheen film documenting the long history of racist portrayals of Arabs in Hollywood films.

The importance of emotional reactions like those produced audio-visually in the opening sequence is, in turn, central to the film's principal theme, as we learn when we move from the combat zone back into the television studio, where Novak broaches the debate over the use of drones on U.S. soil. In keeping with the Fox News slogan of providing "fair and balanced" coverage of issues, Novak interviews people on both sides of the debate. On one side is OmniCorp CEO Sellars, whose combat-drone program could save innumerable U.S. lives. On the other is Hubert Dreyfus, the author of a Senate bill prohibiting the use of combat robots on US soil. Senator Dreyfus's case rests exclusively on the argument that drones do not *feel* anything when they pull the trigger. If they did, the argument implies (and the film ultimately suggests), everything would be fine.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge here that *RoboCop* 2014 is at pains to point out that Novak's supposedly "fair and balanced" coverage is in fact neither. The TV host cuts off Dreyfus in mid-sentence, for example, in order to give Sellars the last word, and Novak's impassioned campaign for the legalization of combat robots on U.S. soil is clearly partisan. But Padilha's approach here only mimics the one it mocks. The director's wink to the film audience as he shows the talk-show host manipulating his guests and their arguments, comes across as its own version of a "fair and balanced" representation of right-wing talk shows, with all the built-in bias that that slogan has come to connote. The cards are clearly stacked against Dreyfus from the beginning. In contrast to the handsome and eloquent Sellars, whose arguments are short and to the point, the bow tie-wearing Dreyfus (Zach Grenier) drones on in a pedantic tone about robots' inability to *feel* anything. When Novak cuts him off, we experience a *Gong Show*-like pleasure and are grateful that someone shut him up. All indications clue us in from the get-go that Dreyfus will ultimately lose the debate, both in the court of movie houses and on the Senate floor.

Throughout the film, Novak plays a role like that of the chorus in a Greek tragedy, articulating our position for us in case we do not know where we should stand. When, at the end of the film, posed before a waving U.S. flag, he delivers



Padilha's filmmaking techniques engage us emotionally rather than intellectually.



In keeping with the Fox News slogan of providing "fair and balanced" coverage of issues, Novak interviews both OmniCorp CEO Raymond Sellars and US Senator Hubert Dreyfus.



Padilha portrays Hubert Dreyfus, the author of a Senate bill prohibiting the use of combat drones on US soil, as an out-of-touch Washington bureaucrat.



Novak's closing monologue presents the ideological conclusion as well as the narrative ending of Padilha's *RoboCop*.

his closing monologue, he therefore presents the film's ideological conclusion as well as its narrative ending:

"I know that some of you might think that [...] these machines violate your civil liberties. Some of you even believe that the use of these drones overseas makes us the same kind of bullying imperialists that our forefathers were trying to escape. To you I say: *Stop whining!* America is now and always will be the greatest country on the face of the Earth. I'm Pat Novak. Goodnight."

The film has come full circle. Novak gets the first word and the last word, as though the entire movie were an extended episode of *The Novak Element*. Therein lies the film's ultimate irony. The new *RoboCop* creates a sense of what it *feels* like to watch a show like *The Novak Element*. In my case, the feeling is a mixture of anger, frustration, and disappointment. And nostalgia: I yearn for an anachronistic cyborg like the one played by Peter Weller in 1987 to put his stainless-steel fist through the screen. Maybe that is a good thing. It prompted me to write this article.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes

1. Macheath a.k.a. Mack the Knife's original line is: "What is a picklock to a bank share? What is the burgling of a bank to the founding of a bank?" (Brecht 92, Act 3, scene 3). [[return to page 1](#)]
2. See, for example, figure 1.1, on income inequality in the United States between 1910 and 2010 (Piketty 24). Other data produced in Piketty's book, some reaching as far back as the eighteenth century, show similar trends in other countries. [[return to page 2](#)]
3. The latest big explosion of this sort of discourse took place in response to the so-called Buffet Rule, proposed by billionaire Warren Buffet, which would set a minimum tax rate of 30% for people earning over \$1 million per year. See the "Buffet Rule" entry on *Wikipedia* for an overview of the rule and a nice dossier of the responses to it. [[return to page 3](#)]

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Captain Jack Sparrow trying to quell a mutiny in *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest* (2006). His crew, the second to attempt a mutiny against him, demands that they commit piracy and go after gold and silver.



Captain Barbosa, the evil pirate from *Pirates of the Caribbean: Curse of the Black Pearl* (2003), continues the tradition of pirate criminality in the first film of the series.



Captain Peter Blood, the eponymous hero of *Captain Blood* (1935). An aristocrat and reluctant pirate, Blood turns on his crew to prove to his love interest that he is not a “thief and pirate.” His tale ends not on the ship, but in the governor’s mansion.

Pirates without piracy: criminality, rebellion, and anarcho-libertarianism in the pirate film

by [Michael D. High](#)

In an early scene in *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest*, Johnny Depp's widely popular character, Captain Jack Sparrow, faces a mutinous crew. The crew revolts because Sparrow has returned from his foray into a demonic fort without anything “shiny,” because “dear old Jack isn't serving their best interests as captain,” because under his command they have not done “a speck of honest pirating.” Sparrow, as he so often does in the series, mollifies the crew with empty promises and verbal trickery, and they ignorantly proceed on a quest for the heart of an immortal sailor who ferries dead souls to the afterlife. Yet this moment between the crew and Sparrow reveals an overlooked truth about the *Pirates of the Caribbean* series and the pirate film in general: film pirates rarely, and in many cases never, commit piracy. Far from celebrating piracy, the pirate film separates pirates from the act itself, eliding representations of robbery at sea and punishing those who commit it.

A perennial, though minor, subject in U.S. cinema, narratives featuring pirates have appeared every couple years since the beginning of the medium with *Three of a Kind: A Pirate's Dream* (1901). The most beloved and iconic pirate films, until recently, came from the classical Hollywood era (1927-1960), and these specifically focused on pirates operating in the Caribbean. The success and cultural significance of Disney's *Pirates of the Caribbean* series, with four films released and a fifth film slated for 2015, has reinvigorated cinematic piracy after a relative dearth of films from the 1960s through the 1990s. The reemergence and success of film pirates after a forty-year lapse raises important questions about the congruities between the present moment and the first half of the last century, and between the earlier cinematic representations of pirates and the current ones.

Not surprisingly, Disney's current series has received significant academic study for its racial politics (Frank 58-62), open-ended nature (Jess-Cooke 205-222; Peterson 70-79), portrayal of gender and queer coding (Karremann 1, 5; Steinhoff; Fradely 294-312), countercultural appropriation (Pugh 1-12; Land 169-170), and transmedia transformations (Aarseth). However, scholars have paid little attention to its relation to earlier U.S. pirate films. This is surprising, as director Gore Verbinski, producer Jerry Bruckheimer, and screenwriters Ted Elliott and Terry Rossio have

repeatedly expressed their debt to the earlier films. In the words of Elliot, they intended to

“do a movie that embraces the story sensibilities of the golden age of the Hollywood pirate movies while appealing to the story sensibilities of the modern audience” (Shewman 51; Surrell 113-119).



Captain Roc Brasiliano in *Against All Flags* (1952), about to take the pleasure from Spitfire Stephens that she has denied him. An unregenerate pirate villain, he aligns with historical accounts which demonize pirates.



Long John Silver, the smooth-tongued villain of *Treasure Island* (1934), betrayer of friends and manipulator of children.



Johnny Depp as Captain Jack Sparrow. The anti-hero of the film series, Sparrow rejects all boundaries and authority. Lead by his magic compass, he chases his desire wherever it may lead, regardless of the needs and safety of his

The early classical Hollywood pirate films, like the *Pirates of the Caribbean* series, make no attempt at historical accuracy, but they are nonetheless limited by historical and cultural conceptions. All the films utilize three dominant interpretations of pirates: as criminals, rebels, or anarcho-libertarians. Because the historical record is ambiguous, these three tropes are scripted into the earlier films as lecherous villainy, superficial rebellion, and gender transformation. The same tropes and their manifestations continue in the current Disney series, though the franchise’s refocusing primarily onto Jack Sparrow after the first film has foregrounded the anarcho-libertarian aspects of the earlier films. Furthermore, while all the films utilize these three ways of understanding piracy to suite their own ideological and industrial imperatives, they do so by minimizing and at times erasing the very act of piracy. Which is to say, U.S. films often disconnect pirates from the act that defines them. These films, by erasing pirates’ collective, economic transgression, undermine pirates’ rebelliousness and instead focus on individual villainy, heroism, and ill-defined, idealized freedom. Although Verbinski believes that piracy is “rebellion distilled” (Surrell 119), he and other filmmakers have subverted that rebellion by mitigating the role of piracy itself within the films.

In this article, I will analyze the historical basis for, and interrelation between, the three dominant interpretations of pirates as criminals, rebels, and anarcho-libertarians. Next, I will trace the mobilization of these tropes across the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise: in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* amusement park ride, in the film *Pirates of the Caribbean: Curse of the Black Pearl*, and then in the remaining films—after Johnny Depp queered the pirate film and Disney reconfigured the series around his character. Finally, I will analyze the earlier actualization of these tropes in the pirate films of the silent era and the classical Hollywood era, with particular focus on those set in the early modern period. Irredeemable criminals, romantic rebels, and utopian freedom fighters dominate historical, cinematic, and popular accounts of piracy because these interpretations have *some* historical validity and are malleable enough to fit differing historical moments, ideological agendas, and consumer desires.

Interpreting pirate history

Though piracy is as old as maritime travel, the pirates and representations of piracy that have dominated U.S. cinema and popular imagination originate primarily in the Caribbean during early European colonial expansion. As Christopher Hill succinctly states it, “Who says pirates says West Indies” (165). Henry Morgan, Captain Kidd, Blackbeard, Long John Silver, Captain Blood, Anne of the Indies — these pirates, both actual and fictional, come from two adjacent periods of piratical activity centered in the Caribbean: the Buccaneer era from 1650s to the early 1690s and the “Golden Age” of piracy, from the 1690s to the end of the 1720s. These are notably rough periodizations, as historians do not agree on when the Golden Age began or its relation to the Buccaneer era that preceded it.

friends and crew.



The Pirates of the Caribbean series, with its cross-dressing and gender ambiguity, evokes the gendered pirate transformation of earlier films.



Captain Edward Teach, known as Black-Beard, practiced horrible brutality to encourage surrender. Cultivating the image of Satan, he would braid his beard and hair with lit matches to scare his adversaries.

Even more disputed, however, are interpretations of pirates' intentions and moral judgments about their actions during these periods.

For example, David Cordingly declares,

"Pirates have acquired a romantic aura they certainly never deserved. Pirates were not maritime versions of Robin Hood and his Merry Men" (xiv).

Linda Grant De Pew similarly insists,

"Pirates are often heroes and heroines in novels and plays in which they would more rightly be cast as villains" (20).

From this perspective, piracy seems solely motivated by greed and a desire to harm others:

"Pirates' motives are clear—others have what they want and they are determined to take it from them—but some pirates (though their primary motivation was still material gain) had secondary motives—to attack and injure those of another religion, another area, or another nationality" (Bradford xi).

Directly opposing this view, Marcus Rediker argues that sailors turned to piracy because it offered them an escape from the privations and injustices of merchant and naval service, because it

"offered the prospect of plunder and 'ready money,' abundant food and drink, the election of officers, the equal distribution of resources, care for the injured, and joyous camaraderie, all as expressions of an ethic of justice" (9).

Stephen Snelders likewise writes that

"piracy can be seen as a form of grand marronage, where crews of seamen created an alternative society with alternative rules aboard their vessels" (3).

For these historians, pirates are maritime "social bandits" who consciously rebelled against hypocritical and unequal social systems. Social bandits fight against the tyranny of those in power, and piracy can be seen as a class-based form of revolt, though not an attempt at revolution, not an attempt to create a new system (Hobsbawm 5). According to Eric Hobsbawm, social banditry

"is little more than endemic peasant protest against oppression and poverty: a cry for vengeance on the rich and the oppressors, a vague dream of some curb upon them, a righting of individual wrongs" (5).

In addition to these conflicting interpretations, which I will call pirate as criminal and pirate as rebel, is a common view of pirates as anarcho-libertarians. Peter Lamborn Wilson, writing under the pseudonym Hakim Bey, advocates this view:

"It is simply wrong to brand the pirates as mere sea-going highwaymen or even protocapitalists...their base communities were not traditional peasant societies but 'utopias' created almost ex nihilo in terra incognita, enclaves of total liberty



Captain Bartholomew Roberts, with his ship the Royal Fortune. Roberts was one of the most successful pirates of the Golden Age, finding the fortune he could never have received in merchant or naval service.



Anne Bonny and Mary Read were infamous after their capture and became folk heroes of ballads and prose. Both women found aboard the pirate ship the freedom to dress, love, and live as they wanted.



The affronted Doña Maria in *The Sea Hawk* (1940). She tells Geoffrey Thorpe, the English privateer, that she will not “drink with thieves and pirates.”

occupying empty spaces on the map” (Bey 13).

For Wilson, pirates’ idealized desire for freedom dissolves context and achieves the unattainable: full and untainted liberty. This interpretation, while having less historical grounding (Kuhn 57-58, 61), is currently the most appealing. It often underlies the celebration of piracy in popular culture and the use of the Jolly Roger by anarchists and anti-capitalist protesters (Land 188). Rarely occurring in isolation, and clearly interrelated, these three interpretations articulate the dominant Anglophone conceptions of pirates as both historical and fictional narratives draw upon them.

Differing moral evaluations here result from a dearth of verifiable historical information on 17th and 18th century piracy, and the semantic instability of the term “pirate” itself (Burg xii). As very few pirates were literate, contemporaneous accounts of shipboard activities come second-hand or from those captured by pirates (and biased by the experience). Due to a lack of pirate self-presentation, pirates’ motives and activities will forever remain a mystery, so that conjecture, fabrication, and romanticization augment the gaps (Kuhn 2-4). Therefore, David Cordingly can insist, “Reason tells us that pirates were no more than common criminals” (xiii), while Robert C. Ritchie can assert “piracy was never *merely* robbery” (iv); and Christopher Land can claim,

“pirates opened onto a radical form of social organization that moved beyond a simple revolt toward a revolutionary consciousness” (183).

Also contributing to the disagreements is another definitional problem of piracy, as a “wide definition of piracy competes with a narrow one” (Kuhn 7). Fundamentally, piracy is robbery at sea, and those who commit that act are pirates. Piracy can include other forms of maritime predations, such as raiding (attacking land from sea), kidnapping, destruction, and murder, but without the intent to seize property such actions are not piracy. Yet as Gabriel Kuhn stresses, an understanding of what constitutes robbery in general

“has been highly contested throughout history, usually based on conflicting political interests” (7).

Designating something as *piracy*, therefore, can foreground how different forms of appropriation are defined as legitimate or illegitimate, and can make clear the structures of power and interest that allow for and prohibit such acts. In this case, during the early colonial period several other maritime actors not designated as pirates appropriated property at sea without authorities labeling their actions as robbery. Pirates existed alongside privateers (called *corsairs* by the French), buccaneers, and freebooters, who all looted ships at sea.

Colonial sovereigns granted letters of marque to *privateers*, which authorized them to attack enemy merchant ships during times of war as an extension of the navy. During times of war, the privateer was, in essence, a maritime entrepreneur who furthered the war effort by attacking supply lines (Turley 38). During peacetime, if the privateer still operated, often the sovereign deemed the privateer’s actions illegal so as to ensure plausible deniability with allies (Earle 23). The distinction between pirate and privateer for the sailors themselves was fluid and strategic, with most



By the end of the film, Doña Maria admits her love for Thorpe and he ascends from privateer to knight of the realm, from pirate to lover.

legally representing themselves as privateers while committing piracy (“Of Pirates” 75; Kontorovich 214).

In addition, the Spanish inadvertently created Buccaneers at the beginning of the 17th century when they tried to depopulate the northern side of Hispaniola (modern Haiti). In order to clear out the English and Dutch living in the wilds of the island, the Spanish destroyed their settlements and hunting camps, and they attempted to slaughter the wild cattle off of which the settlers survived, scattering them to the surrounding islands. Known as *boucaniers*—those who smoke and barbecue meat—this “remarkable blend of human flotsam” mixed with the French conquerors of Tortuga and began attacking Spanish ships and networking with other islands (Galvin 110). These men, who called themselves “The Brethren of the Coast,” may have been influenced by the British radicals of the New Model army and the Monmouth Rebellion, who

“rejected a state church, supported full religious toleration, and often carried this over to advocacy of democratic, communist or antinomian ideas” (Hill 161).

The Dutch, French, and British governments utilized, encouraged, and celebrated buccaneers for damages they did to the Spanish trade monopoly, plunder they brought into the colonial economies, and defense they provided to settlements. Rather than criminal outcasts, the buccaneers were in fact the economic engine of the non-Spanish Caribbean during this period (Konstam 95–115; Earle 92–93).

French, British, and Dutch buccaneers did not generally attack their own national or allied ships, and were therefore considered heroic in their home countries and could be easily reintegrated into legal society, as shown by the lieutenant governorship of Henry Morgan. Not in the direct employ of a crown, the buccaneer served the interests of the enemies of Spain and did not receive from them the opprobrium and appellation of pirate. To the Spanish though, they were undoubtedly pirates (Turley 28-36; Leeson 7-8).

In a related fashion, Dutch sailors coined the term, *vrugbuitter* (freebooter), to describe those who did not honor Spanish claims to the new world. Bypassing their intermediaries, Dutch traders (and many from other nations) went to the Americas to trade with Spanish settlements illegally. Due to the Spanish prohibition against settlements trading with non-Spaniards and the intimate marriage of commerce and war during the early period of colonial expansion, merchants often attacked settlements as a strategy to both steal *and* to encourage prohibited trade (Pérotin-Dumon 207-209). They were, of course, pirates according to the Spanish government, demonstrating that

“the trope of piracy has always been highly mobile, a marker of the very instabilities of those lines that define social and ethical standards” (Mackie 29).

Pirates, in the wide, normative definition used during the Buccaneer period, were those who overstepped their authority or robbed on the behalf of an enemy. However, following the War of Spanish Succession (1702-1713), pirates in the narrow definition appeared in the Caribbean attacking ships regardless of national affiliation. These formerly mobilized privateers returned to a flooded maritime labor market and many “went on the account,” bringing Caribbean trade to a standstill. Prioritizing trade over naval dominance, the colonial powers waged a “rhetorical, military, and

legal campaign” against their former employees (Rediker 127). Declared pirates and therefore legally *hostis humani generis*, the “enemy of all mankind,” pirates were linked through legal phrasing with the tyrant, the brigand, and the savage (Edelstein 31). These “villains of all nations” were, actually or no, at war with the world and any naval power could seize and execute them without trial (Rediker 128). By 1728, the European powers had exterminated several thousand of them and ended the Golden Age of piracy.

All three interpretations (criminal, rebel, anarcho-libertarian) have some basis in reality, and inflect the moral judgments placed on the nominally different maritime predators. Pirates were undoubtedly criminals, breaking the laws of multiple states, and did commit horrible atrocities against those who did not surrender easily (and some who did). For example, Edward Teach, known as Blackbeard, actively cultivated an image of cruelty and wickedness, “making his men believe he was the devil incarnate” (Johnson 61). One historian has even described pirate Captain Henry Avery as “the very model of a pirate villain” and “one of that rarest of human creatures: a completely selfish man” (Sherry 67, 69).

Pirates were also undoubtedly rebels, reacting against the scarcities of maritime proletarian life and the absolute power of the merchant ship captain. According to *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the most notorious Pyrates*, the early 18th century book from which most pirate lore and fact originates, the pirate Bartholomew “Black Bart” Roberts summed up the choice between piracy honest maritime labor thus:

“In an honest service there is thin commons, low wages, and hard labor; in this, plenty and satiety, pleasure and ease, liberty and power; and who would not balance creditor on this side, when all the hazard that is run for it, at worst, is only a sour look or two at choking. No, a merry life and a short one, shall be my motto.” (Johnson 213)

Underpaid, subject to horrible abuse, and lacking effective legal recompense or protection, many pirates viewed their actions as “doing justice to sailors” (Rediker 83-102).

And pirates were certainly trying to create something liberated, something radically democratic and possibly anarchistic (Land 190). Under the Jolly Roger, pirates chose their captains (and all policies) by democratic vote, distributed power between the captain and quartermaster, shared loot amongst the crew based on skill (the largest share was only 1.5), and lived everyday in carnivalesque excess (Rediker 60-82). Captain Charles Bellamy expressed the radical libertarian sentiment when he responded to a sailor who refused to join his crew:

“*I am a free prince* and have as much authority to make war on the whole world as he who has a hundred sail of ships and an army of a hundred thousands men in the field” (Sherry 131).

So apparent was the “freedom inherent in the pirate’s life” that many people during the 18th century believed in the pirate nation of Libertatia in Madagascar and its fictitious founder, Captain Mission, even though there was no corroborating evidence of such a settlement or captain (Sherry 99).

The semantic ambiguity of piracy and the power inherent in legally designating piracy likewise affects moral judgments about pirates. The

legality of privateering and the national celebration of buccaneering mitigate the opprobrium of more conservative historians, thereby creating a separate moral category that could be applied to similar actors. For the more socialist historians, finding similarity of activity but difference in legal and moral standing highlights the social construction of criminality and the hypocrisy of rulers. This analysis undermines the former historians' moral condemnation of pirates. And for the anarchists and libertarians, the fact that men fought against the early nation states erases any ties (national and economic) they may have had to those states. What differs is not the historical data but the *meanings* of the crimes, rebellions, and attempts at liberty. As Hans Turley, one of the first scholars to study representations of piracy, notes in an oft quoted passage,

“These larger-than-life figures remain legendary precisely because there is no ‘truth’ that can be determined...The legend and the reality are woven into a fabric impossible to unravel. However, the *way* this fabric is woven can be examined” (7).

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The Pirates of the Caribbean franchise



The "Treasure Room" of the Pirates of the Caribbean ride foretells the fate of those who lust after gold.



Howard Pyle's *Dead Men Tell No Tales*, first published in *Collier's Weekly* in 1899. Many of the scenarios, and even scenes, from Pyle's paintings have been reproduced in pirate films.

Released in 2003, the *Pirates of the Caribbean: Curse of the Black Pearl* grossed \$654.3 million in worldwide box office and earned a Screen Actor's Guild award for Johnny Depp in the role of Captain Jack Sparrow ("*Pirates of the Caribbean Special Briefing*"; "Awards *Pirates*"). The second film in the series, *Dead Man's Chest*, grossed one billion dollars worldwide, while the third and fourth, *At World's End* and *On Stranger Tides*, grossed roughly the same ("*Pirates of the Caribbean Franchise*"). At this point, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, with four films released and a fifth in development, has brought in \$3.7 billion dollars worldwide in box office sales, making it the seventh highest grossing series ever ("*Film Franchises*").

Disney executives began development on the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise as a way to capitalize on and cross-promote the various Pirates of the Caribbean rides. According to Walt Disney Studio executive Brigham Taylor,

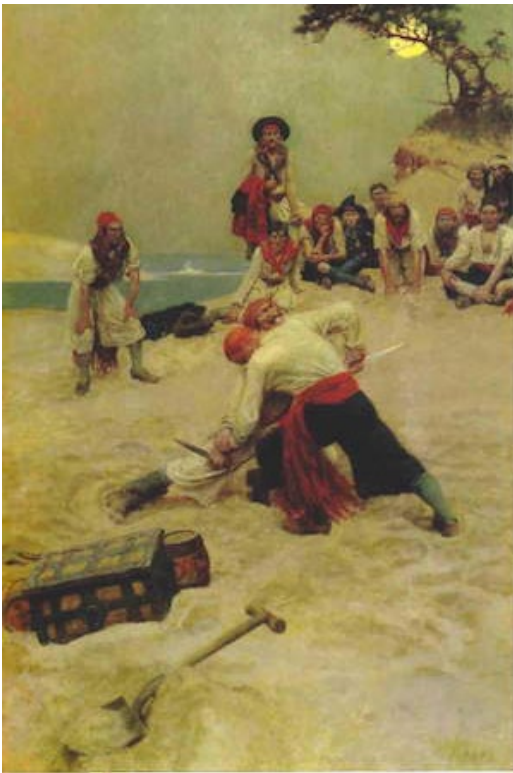
"We talked about the possibility of a pirate movie and the fact that we were the only ones who could call a pirate movie, *Pirates of the Caribbean*" (Surrell 114).

Opened in in Disneyland in 1967, the Pirates of the Caribbean ride marked Disney's entry into three-dimensional, animatronic story telling. The ride floats passengers on flat bottom boats through the haunted caverns of Dead Man's Cove, past a pirate galleon bombarding a colonial fort, and through a besieged town as pirates torment captives, auction wenches, and attempt to escape from a subterranean jail. The ride, the "crown jewel" of the Disney theme park experiences" (Surrell 7), was so successful that the company recreated it in each of the future theme parks, introducing the pirates to park attendees in Florida, Japan, and Paris.

Following the success of the films, the franchise now encompasses many products:

- two young adult fiction series,
- an adult adventure book (*Pirates of the Caribbean: The Price of Freedom*),
- a comic book adaptation of *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest*,
- a video game corresponding to the second and third films,
- as well as two prequel video games (*Pirates of the Caribbean: The Legend of Jack Sparrow* and *Pirates of the Caribbean: Armada of the Damned*),
- a mobile phone only game (*Pirates of the Caribbean Multiplayer Mobile*), and
- a massive multiplayer online role playing game (*Pirates of the Caribbean Online*),
- a refurbishment of most of the theme park rides to feature aspects of the films, and
- the more general merchandising and toy tie-ins of modern blockbuster films.

This kind of synergy, at which Disney excels, is only possible during the current period of media convergence, in which not only texts cross media barriers, but



Howard Pyle's *Which Shall Be Captain?* was first published in *Harper's Monthly Magazine* in 1911. This particular scene appears in *The Black Pirate* and is then recreated in several studio era pictures.



The animatronic pirates torture the townspeople for information, causing suffering on an unending loop.



in which media company conglomeration facilitates such crossing through orchestrated production, marketing, distribution, and exhibition.

Yet the intertextual network that informs the films does not begin with the ride, nor does the ride particularly inform the later manifestations. As Anne Peterson stresses,

“Although piracy, mutiny, and rogue sailors may have certainly existed, the manner in which they are displayed in the ride—as swashbuckling caricatures, bungling and gluttonous—is more a function of exposure to other media, not to factual pirate accounts”(64).

The Disney “Imagineer” primarily responsible for the design of the ride, Marc Davis, was inspired by a conflation of graphic, cinematic and literary representations. Like Douglas Fairbanks and other filmmakers, Davis drew from the work of U.S. illustrator Howard Pyle (Surrell 24), whose many magazine pieces and posthumously published *Howard Pyle's Book of Pirates* single-handedly codified the iconography of early modern piracy. Through Pyle's illustrations, pirate costuming developed as distinct from that of other sailors, and films have repeated the costuming and standardized the portrayal so thoroughly that bandanas, ragged breeches, open necked shirts, and faded doublets now signify a character type instead of the amalgamation of the Stuart era fashion and working class clothing (Lubin 167-181).[10] Yet in adopting Pyle's visual motifs, later artists have ignored the “array of social and economic concerns” his drawings “symbolically addressed,” such as class strife, economic policy, U.S. aggression, and colonial oppression (Lubin 177).

While researching pirates for his designs, Davis felt the historical realities took “a lot of the glamour out of these characters.” According to Davis' research, pirates

“would have to sign the [pirates' contractual] ‘articles’ with their own blood. It turns out that there were very few battles with pirates at sea. Most pirates died of venereal disease that they got in bawdy houses in various coastal towns” (Surrell 24).

Davis' disappointment with history betrays a desire for the pirate hero of the Hollywood film, the debonair aristocrats that save helpless damsels in distress. His “real pirates,” however, betray the blending of history and moral censure to produce a Puritan-inflected view of pirates as sexual deviants and absolute criminals.

Tamed for a family audience, the Pirates of the Caribbean ride weaves together a series of tableaux in which pirates torment hapless citizens, auction off women, and chase gold. Irredeemably immoral, yet still bungling and dissolute, the pirates of the ride offer a stark portrayal of pirate life as one of unrestrained excess and predation. As Davis remarks, a ride

“is not a storytelling medium [in the sense of a movie]. But it does

"The Auction," in which pirates bid on wenches, insinuates that pirates were sex traffickers and rapists.



The villainous pirate crew in *Curse of the Black Pearl* (2003). Within the film, moonlight reveals what pirates really are: monsters.



Will Turner, the blacksmith turned reluctant pirate. Throughout the first film, he negotiates the moral status of the pirate, trying to reconcile his "pirate blood" with his dedication to love and righteousness.



The Pirates of the Caribbean: Curse of the Black Pearl. Elizabeth Swann, the daughter of the Governor of Jamaica, constrained by her bodice. As the character representing the "romance of the pirate," she rebels against her class and the social limits of her gender.

give you experiences. You experience the *idea* of pirates" (Surrell 30).

The riders' experience of the scenes are not structured by their linear progression; the scenes exist simultaneously and independently, activating already present cultural conceptions (Aarseth 7). "The *idea* of pirates" within the ride is, of course, *an* idea of pirates that frames them within a particularly simplified Manichean morality, in which crime is a mark of character, not a social construction. This portrayal combines themes of anarchy and criminality while denying any rebellion in piracy.

Espen Aarseth, writing of relations between the ride, the first film, *Pirates of the Caribbean: Curse of the Black Pearl*, and simultaneously-released *Pirates of the Caribbean* video game, calls attention to the particular lack of shared content between the three media manifestations of the same property (7). Though the film and the game were released to exploit the ride, aside from the shared name and a few visual allusions, there is little overlap between the texts. Applying John Cawelti's distinction between the cultural and structural levels of popular fiction to *Pirates of the Caribbean* and other transmedia properties, Aarseth argues that what transfers across media is not content but rather concepts. What transfers between the history of pirates and the rides, the celluloid films, and the digital film and video game texts made about them is not the stories of pirates, but rather the concepts associated with their stories adapted to each medium's narrative, generic, structural, and industrial conventions.

Pirates of the Caribbean: Curse of the Black Pearl

The first film in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* series, *Curse of the Black Pearl*, complicates the ride's simple portrayal of pirate villainy by splitting the pirates into two groups. It tells the tale of Captain Jack Sparrow (Johnny Depp), Captain Barbosa (Geoffrey Rush), Will Turner (Orlando Bloom), and Elizabeth Swann (Keira Knightley) as they circumnavigate their various desires for treasure, revenge, the *Black Pearl* (a ship), and each other. Barbosa, who was previously Sparrow's first mate, helms the *Black Pearl* with his pirate crew. They are searching for a piece of cursed Aztec gold held by Swann, who is the Governor of Jamaica's daughter, and, in tandem with the gold, a descendant of Boot Strap Bill Turner, who is Will's father. Without the final gold piece and the descendant, they will continue on as cursed monsters that cannot "feel," lacking the pleasures of taste, touch, and smell. Sparrow wants to avenge himself on Barbosa for leading a mutiny against him and to once again be captain of the *Pearl*. Turner wants to marry Swann, though his station as a blacksmith's apprentice makes such a union seemingly impossible. The combinations of these various desires and each of the main characters' ignorance of the others' desires propel the plot. Eventually Turner, Swann, and Sparrow defeat Barbosa and his undead crew.

Barbosa, as the unregenerate pirate villain, proves himself bloodthirsty, heartless, and backstabbing. He and his crew are unregenerate sadists, literally incapable of feeling due to the cursed treasure and doomed to live forever without empathy or sensation as phantasmagoric sociopaths. Will Turner opposes Barbosa as the good pirate, though Will is a reluctant pirate, who practices sword fighting "three hours a day" so that when he meets a pirate he "may kill it." The first film is Turner's journey to become a pirate, his growing understanding that, in his own words, one can be a pirate "and a good man." Turner's piracy, however, only encompasses the theft of a single navy ship, spurred by the British Royal Navy's refusal to chase after Barbosa and crew after they kidnap Elizabeth. The film, in fact, crystalizes in the moment when Elizabeth tells her father that she will marry beneath her station. Replying to his comment that Turner is a blacksmith, she murmurs lovingly, "No. He's a



Anne Bonny and Mary Read, as represented in Captain Charles Johnson's *A General History of the Robberies & Murders of the Most Notorious Pirates*. The illustrations present the women's breasts, cross-dressing, and weaponry to stress their defiance of gender roles.



Swann and Sparrow in the climax of *Dead Man's Chest*, as she chains him to the mast to be devoured by the Kraken. Her major moral dilemma, the killing of Sparrow, she accomplishes indirectly through seduction and subterfuge, and it haunts her until he is reincarnated. Sparrow calls her a "pirate."



Angelica Teach in *Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides* (2011). Her queer impersonation of Sparrow reflects his narcissism and confuses his desire.

pirate." Yet his piracy is meager (at best), and "his transgressions are subordinated to the plot's overarching focus on the quest for love" (Pugh 8). In his case, piracy clearly upholds the very laws that it breaks, but without questioning the social hierarchies the laws support. Governor Swann (Jonathon Pryce) sums up the film's equivocation in the dénouement:

"Perhaps, on the rare occasion when pursuing the right course demands an act of piracy, piracy itself can be the right course."

According to screenwriters Elliot and Rossio, "Elizabeth is the protagonist [in the film], representing the idea of the romance of the pirate" (Shewman 51). The daughter of the colonial Governor of Jamaica, she is more threatened by a marriage proposal than the pirate attack, and her attraction to pirates clearly stems from the constraints of her gender and her class position. Aboard the pirate ship, she finds the freedom to admit her love for Will and to erase all the previous limits society placed on her. As the series continues, she becomes not only a skilled swordsman and mariner but eventually the pirate King, leading all the world's pirates to war with the East India Company.

Her rejection of the limited options within patriarchal society recalls the stories of the infamous Anne Bonny and Mary Read. Both female pirates were captured upon the ship of "Calico" Jack Rackam in 1720 and sentenced to hang, but found respite from execution when they revealed their pregnancies. The many versions of these women's tales center on the transgression "of the lines separating men from women" and the juxtaposition of femaleness, which saved them from hanging, and ferocity and cruelty (Paravisini-Gebert 92). For instance, Anne Bonny, when visited by her lover on the day of his execution, supposedly told him "that she was sorry to see him there, but if he had fought like a man, he need not have been hanged like a dog" (Johnson 131). Similarly, Mary Read pre-empted a duel between her lover and another pirate by challenging the contestant and killing him in a fight with sword and pistol (Johnson 123). Female cross-dressing during the early modern period, especially to pass as soldiers and sailors, was primarily a proletarian practice; working class women wore men's clothes so they could fulfill the hard labor that went along with those careers. The women's stories, circulated in popular ballads of "warrior women" and celebrated by proletarian men and women alike, directly conflicted with the discourses of feminine nature prevalent at the time (Rediker 112-115).

Unlike her historical predecessors, however, Swann is an aristocrat, and therefore she fits the pattern of de-proletarianized heroes common in classical Hollywood cinema (Hark 4; Bond 315). As the series progresses, she cross-dresses and fights alongside the other pirates, becoming one of the most armed and (supposedly) dangerous women in the world (Fradley 303). Yet once extracted from colonial society, her rebellion against gender and class evaporate, and the series is careful to never question her physical ability or to represent her as brutal and threatening. She ends her tale pregnant, on land, waiting patiently for her love.

Captain Jack Sparrow, the other main character, embodies the trope of pirates as anarcho-libertarian. In his first encounter with Sparrow, Turner reacts in disgust to the pulling of a gun in a sword fight, saying, "You cheated," to which Sparrow mockingly responds, "Pirate." In all of the situations he enters, Sparrow transforms the standard codes of operating and roles of the participants, as symbolized by his strategy for escape and attack, which proceed without plan and metamorphose his surroundings from mundane objects into whatever contingency demands. Sparrow explicitly articulates the alignment of piracy with liberty when he describes his desire to recapture his ship, which motivates him throughout the series:



The treasure room on the Isla de Muerta, which holds the accumulated booty of a decade of piracy. The crew of the Black Pearl cannot spend it due to the curse.



Sparrow in *At World's End*, seeing his fate reflected in the dead Kraken's eye. The Kraken is killed by its master, Davy Jones, under the orders of Lord Cutler Beckett. Sparrow, pondering his fate, observes that though the world has not changed, "there is less in it."



The Spanish soldiers of *On Stranger Tides* care nothing for piracy. Instead, their goal is to destroy the fantastic fountain of youth to ensure that "only God can grant eternal life."



"Wherever we want to go, go. That's what a ship is, you know. It's not just a keel and hole and deck and sails. That's what a ship needs. But what a ship is, what the Black Pearl really is, is freedom."

The running joke of the series, however, is that Sparrow is the best *and* the worst pirate ever. The inconstancy of his desire leads to the endless loss and recapture of his ship, as well as his liberty. The character demonstrates the contradiction inherent in total liberty: that one individual's total liberty will restrain the liberty of others. In this vein, Sparrow's desire to save himself causes the incarceration and near death of each of his comrades, as well as the constant mutiny of his crews.

It is also this free-floating, liberated desire that marks the character as queer. Depp's performance, based on Keith Richards and Pepe LePew (Blunt), clashes pirate masculinity with glam-rock femininity. Depp's performance and the character Sparrow's influence over the other characters confuse distinctions throughout the film: alive or dead, friend or enemy, masculine or feminine, gay or straight. Heike Steinhoff, in one of the first articles to analyze the film, argues that "rather than simply reproducing cultural dichotomies, Captain Jack Sparrow's representation unsettles binary categorizations." The film's

"ambiguities, self-reflexivity, and contradictory 'maps of meanings' characterize it as a post-classical and double-coded film" that "allows for queer readings without rendering the film explicitly queer" (Steinhoff).

Not surprisingly, the historical ambiguities of actual pirate lives have likewise spawned queer readings. B. R. Burg claims,

"Among pirates, either aboard their ships or while living on isolated West Indian islands, homosexual acts were not integrated with or subordinated to alternate styles of sexual contact. They were the only form of sexual expression engaged in by members of the buccaneer community" (xxxix).

The homosocial nature of pirate communities suggests high incidences and acceptance of homosexual activity, without the censure of the dominant homophobic culture (Burg 69). In this formulation, the rebellion of the sailor through the crime of piracy influences the rejection of social and religious prohibitions as a celebration of liberty (Burg 110). Turley sums up the logical connection between pirate criminality and pirate sexuality thus:

"If we imagine a piratical subject, however—a merging of the economic criminal and the cultural transgressor who 'declares war against all mankind'—we should be able to understand the implicit link between homoeroticism and piracy" (29).

The semantic, legal, and moral instability of piracy, coupled with the lack of prohibitions in the same sex maritime world of the pirate, produce a subject that "highlights the instability of sexual and gendered identity, and the instability of dichotomies represented by gender, sexual desire, masculinity, and capital" (Turley 42).

Depp's "pirating" of the pirate film foregrounded pirates' sexual and gender ambiguities in a way that was not originally scripted (Peterson 75). In fact, the direction in which Depp took the character was so radical that Disney CEO Michael Isner reportedly felt Depp was "ruining the movie," and Depp's performance caused other executives to ask if the pirate was gay (Smith). Believing that this ambiguity had the potential to derail the video game and merchandising efforts, as well as Disney's carefully constructed family image,

Murtog and Mullroy begin as stalwart, though bungling, soldiers of the British Navy in *Curse of the Black Pearl* and end up pirates through a simple change of clothes and vernacular.

the company downplayed Depp in prerelease promotional materials and instead foregrounded the sinister nature of the other pirates (Peterson 75). The film's overwhelming success and Sparrow's acclaim caused them to change strategies and the focus of the future films.



In *At World's End*, Murtagg and Mullroy encounter their pirate doubles, Pintel and Ragetti. A moment's hesitation hints at confrontation, but Pintel and Ragetti shrug and scream along with them.



The crew of the Flying Dutchmen. These sailors, bound to the ship, slowly morph into human/fish hybrids. Their bodies, like that of many other characters in the world of the Pirates of the Caribbean, resist stable categorization and obscure boundaries.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Beyond the *Curse of the Black Pearl*



The Pirate Lieutenant in the *Black Pirate* (1929), tying up the princess to ensure he can have her after the battle.



Captain Levasseur in *Captain Blood* (1935). His hostage cowering in front of him, Arabella, will help ease his “loneliness,” whether she likes it or not.

With the success of the first film, Disney “quickly realized that the image on which to capitalize was...the leering pansexual pirate” (Peterson 75). Thus the second, third, and fourth films have all focused on Sparrow and abandoned any examination of the pirate as a criminal. A reincarnated Barbossa and some of his crew have even joined Depp and company in their fight for, in the words of Pirate King Swann, “freemen and freedom.” The gender and sexual ambiguity have also become staples of the series, which is, according to Martin Fradley,

“perhaps the contemporary high-water mark for the mainstreaming of queer theory” (297).

In order to transform the pirate into the perpetually sequelized play of anarchic desire, the series has increasingly disconnected pirates from the act of piracy. *Curse of the Black Pearl*, while not featuring any robbery at sea, clearly aligns Barbossa’s undead pirate crew with previous acts of theft. As the series continues, however, it creates a fantasy world that is suspiciously lacking in maritime trade, populated instead by all manner of supernatural creatures. Each film centers on the recovery or discovery of some supernatural object or entity that is impossible to actually possess, some motivating, unobtainable McGuffin. Through the deferred objects of desire, the series dematerializes piracy and creates fantasy relations of exchange.

Piracy in the world of the films effectively becomes the desire for freedom and fantasy, and anyone who calls themselves a pirate becomes one. In *Dead Man’s Chest*, the antagonist and director of the East India Trading Company, Lord Cutler Beckett (Tom Hollander), forces Turner to take an offer of pardon and letters of marque to Sparrow, so he may be “free, a privateer in the employ of England.” Turner objects that Sparrow will not consider “employment the same as being free,” and Cutler exposes that the goal of the East India Trading Company is precisely the destruction of that fantastical freedom:

“Freedom. Jack Sparrow is a dying breed. The world is shrinking. The blank edges of the map filled in. Jack must find his place in the new world or perish.”

Though the films invoke maritime trade with terms like “it’s just good business” and “currency is the currency of the realm,” an exchange of goods is suspiciously lacking throughout the series. The goal of the colonial empires is not to secure commerce but to contain fantasy. In *On Strange Tides*, the most recent film, the British and Spanish sovereigns vie to prevent each other from reaching the fountain of youth, enlisting Sparrow and Barbossa as aids. The villain Blackbeard (Ian McShane), “the pirate who all pirates fear,” does not rob ships but rather magically shrinks them down and puts them in glass bottles. The pirating of pirates is not robbery but collection and exhibition—a process similar to the redefinition and



The brutal pirate boatswain of *Dancing Pirate* (1936), beating and berating the shanghaied dancing instructor.



Captain Billy Leech in *The Black Swann* (1942), as he torments a captive before carrying her off.



The Hook, the “most bloodthirsty buccaneer in history,” killing his loyal and able mapmaker to hide the location of the treasure in *The Princess and the Pirate* (1944).

containment of piracy within cinema. Blackbeard’s motivation for collecting pirate ships is never clear, and the narrative fails to distinguish him from a pirate hunter.

The films demonstrate the evacuation of the meaning of “pirate” most clearly through the characters of Murtogg and Mullroy (Giles New and Angus Barnett), who begin the series as British Royal Navy members and end it (in *At World’s End*) as pirates. After the pirates have destroyed the East India Company’s flagship and the British Armada retreats in fear, Murtogg and Mullroy find themselves aboard the pirates’ ship. They quickly switch into pirate rags and scream out, “Argghhh” and “Shiver me timbers,” in effect becoming members of the crew. Being a pirate, as Turner and Swann also show, simply means changing one’s clothes and following Jack Sparrow on adventures.

In the world of the CGI blockbuster, piracy is celebrated because it is not really piracy. Yet this is also a world in which gender policing and heteronormativity are remarkably absent, in which queer desire circulates freely. The *Pirates of the Caribbean* films, through the elision of capital, focus instead on the circulation of desire and the exchange of bodies and identity without social constraint. The cursed pirates of *The Black Pearl*, who become skeletal under the moonlight; the transmogrified pirates of the Flying Dutchman, part human, part crustacean; the goddess Calypso, trapped in human form; and the pirate drag of Elizabeth Swann and Angelica Teach; bodies within the film morph and change, crossing boundaries between male and female, human and animal, alive and dead. In this world, pirate liberty subsumes rebellion and criminality as piracy disappears within fantasy liberation.

The Classical Hollywood Pirate Film

The elision of piracy and the play of gender identity in the Pirates of the Caribbean series is less novel than it seems at first. In fact, both aspects, as well as the interplay of criminality, rebellion, and utopian revolt, operate in the earlier U.S. pirate films, though much more conservatively. The current pirates bear the influence of their historical intertexts, though they are updated for a more liberal historical moment. Now film companies (even those as “family friendly” as Disney) recognize both the need to respect traditional notions of gender and sexual behavior and the profit of coding their product for gay subcultural appeal (Griffin 119-214; Fradley 310).

Jean-Loup Bourget and Brian Taves posit a coherent and positive pattern of representation in the pirate film. Bourget argues that the pirate film, as a subgenre of the adventure film, “almost inevitably acclaims a pattern of social unrest and revolution” (57). Similarly, Taves situates the pirate film as a subgenre of the “historical adventure” genre, the spirit and conventions of which are summed up in the “Declaration of Independence itself” (219). For both scholars, cinema pirates are the embodiment of rebellion, the outsiders who fight to uphold liberty and equality.



The cruel El Toro, in *Long John Silver* (1954) (the sequel to *Treasure Island*), passing a death sentence on the men who have failed him.

Although Bourget and Taves rightly highlight a tendency of the pirate film to advocate revolt and democracy, the rebel pirates' eventual domestication and cessation of piracy counters this tendency, as do the numerous representations of evil pirate antagonists. Within the films, the pirate protagonist's love interest features repeatedly as the agent of domestication and as the target of pirate sexual predators. While never morally compromised by brutality or wanton, selfish theft, the pirate protagonists must nonetheless prove their goodness and righteousness to their love interest. They must ultimately prove that they are not pirates, that they are not like the lecherous, sadistic pirate antagonists.

Mirroring the tripartite schema of pirate interpretation, Hollywood pirates fall into three broad types. The first, and most common, is that of the pirate villain. The second, most-lauded representation superficially celebrates heroic piracy. The third representation positions the pirate ship as a temporary site for the protagonist's gender transformation. This final representation, the temporary pirate, is a caricature of pirate freedom, in which a radical utopian impulse becomes the correction of gender performance.

The criminal villain



The opening scene of the *Black Pirate*, in which pirates tie their captives to the mast and torment them before blowing their ship to pieces.

Film after film repeats the representation of pirates as an unrelenting criminals that revel in cruelty. Backstabbing, dissolute, lecherous, and sadistic, these pirates are often grotesquely scarred and larger in size than the other characters, thereby making the villains' morality visibly legible. Lacking motivations for their piracy and often a backstory, these villains, unlike the other two types of pirates, actually rob ships and commit acts of violence. Their violence is always extreme and unnecessary, as if violence were not a constant part of the 18th century maritime world (Rediker 15). They are also sexual predators, seizing any opportunity to accost an unprotected woman. Like the mustachioed antagonist of early melodrama, the sexual predations of the pirate counterpoise the virtue of the pirate protagonist.

Much of Hollywood cinema functions in the melodramatic mode, as Linda Williams has argued, mixing pathos and action to generate audience affect (42). The pirate film is particularly suited to melodrama because it provides constant sources of pathos, moral polarization, and sensationalism through depictions of suffering bodies, decontextualized iniquity, canon blasts, sword fights, and last minute rescues (Singer 37-58). The pirate as criminal is reminiscent of the "male villains who exploit their greater size, strength, and sadistic guile" to victimize women in the early Serial Queen melodrama of the 1910s and 20s (Singer 253). However, as Ben Singer shows, the earlier Serial Queen films complexly combined victimization with female empowerment representative of the "New Woman," addressing both anxieties about social change and the increased purchasing power of women during the period (232-255). The pirate films (as will be discussed below) are much more fearful of female power.

One of the earliest films to position the pirate as a villain is *The Pirate's Gold* (1908), directed by D.W. Griffith. In it, Young Wilkinson (George Gebhardt) departs for sea, leaving his mother at home. Later, pirates come ashore and, squabbling, kill each other. Before one dies, he convinces Wilkinson's mother to hide his gold, after which she is struck by lightning. Young Wilkinson returns, marries, and when he is deep in debt, attempts



Douglas Fairbanks as the *Black Pirate*, who, ironically, fights piracy the entire film. This poster mobilizes several interpretations of piracy in order to sell the film.

suicide. At the last minute, his wife pushes the gun aside, and the stray bullet reveals the gold, solving Wilkinson's financial problems (Simmon 146).

In *The Pirate's Gold*, the pirates are unimportant in and of themselves. They occupy the role of thieving backstabbers, a foil for Wilkinson, the loving son and husband, who goes off to sea yet does not become a criminal. However, the pirates' place at the beginning of the film structures the rest, defining Wilkinson's attempted suicide as a righteous act—first because he would rather kill himself than steal to appease his creditors, and second because it leads to his deserving salvation. Whereas the pirates have no fidelity to anyone, familial piety defines Wilkinson: in his distress and posture, “arms to heaven, palm to breast, hands clutching head,” on the spot of his mother's death; in his sunlit happiness with his new bride; and in his wife's vigilance in watching over him after their furniture has been taken, a vigilance that leads her to knock the gun away from his head, revealing the hidden treasure (Simmon 147). Although the film only has fourteen shots, it jumps forward in time four times (Gunning 132), yet through all the passing years Wilkinson does not change, as his essential goodness remains intact as the inverse of the pirates' wickedness.

Another film that foregrounds this villainous representation of pirates, while also demonstrating the superficial celebration of piracy and the pirate ship as a space of transformation, is Albert Parker's Douglas Fairbanks vehicle, *The Black Pirate* (1929). Within the film, pirates are particular only in their general dastardliness. The first scene opens onto the pirate symbol par excellence, the Jolly Roger, and shows a pirate captain looting dead bodies as his crew binds seamen to the mast before igniting a powder keg. To emphasize the pirates' depravity, the camera closes in on a small seaman below deck who furtively swallows a ring. The pirate captain, while reveling at the gunpowder trail being laid, notices the act and orders another pirate to cut out the ring. The camera remains with the captain while his order is carried out, as he picks his teeth and spits, showing no concern for the loss of human life. He then wipes the ring off, looks at it approvingly, and pockets it.

The pirates' viciousness in the film significantly differs from its advertising strategy. A promotional poster for the Apollo Theatre repeatedly designates Fairbanks as the daring pirate hero, while the film itself shows pirates as barbarous villains opposing him. The film and poster utilize different discourses and conceptions of piracy. In marketing the film, the poster celebrates pirates as romantic figures; within the film though, the narrative revolves around Fairbanks defeating the murderous scourges of humanity.



The Black Pirate transforms from impotent son to leader of men through his ruse as a pirate.



Jaime Waring in *The Black Swann* forcing himself on Lady Margaret. He slaps her unconscious, and, when interrupted while carrying her away like a caveman, throws her to the floor (with a distinctly emphasized crash).

The title furthers this conflation by positioning Fairbanks as a pirate, though he is actually a Duke pretending to be a pirate in the film. The variability of positioning and generic designation demonstrates the pragmatic (i.e. context dependent and institutionally specific) nature of both piracy and genre.

The poster also betrays pirate portrayals' homoerotic potential. Though the bottom of the poster asserts the character's heterosexuality, the top hints at Fairbanks' sexual availability with his crotch thrust forward as he clutches two smoking cannons. Through the poster's polysemy, the bold Buccaneer's body becomes "The Adventure Of A Lifetime!" that any viewer may have. Daniel Cornell writes that Fairbanks' body functions within *The Black Pirate* as the film's motivating spectacle, specifically coded as a site of sexual pleasure for both heterosexual women and gay men (79). Although Cornell does not consider heterosexual, identificatory male pleasure in Fairbanks' body, his essay underlines the multiplicity of discourses operating within the film and its marketing, as well as the hypermasculinity of Fairbanks' costuming and the coded relationship to his stalwart mate (86). While the narrative insists on its heterosexual plot, Fairbanks' unclothed body and the sailors' homosocial bonds suggest other possibilities aboard the pirate ship. The film illustrates the liberty associated with the pirate ship through its sexual ambiguity and Fairbanks' transformation from impotent victim of pirates to bare-chested braggadocio and soon-to-be husband.

The superficial celebration of the rebel pirate

The problematic relation between Fairbanks' *Black Pirate* and the act of piracy prefigures an entire era of Hollywood's separating pirates from the act that determines their designation. *The Black Swan* (1942) is typical of the studio films' rejection of piracy, as the script relates the conversion of Captain Jamie Waring (Tyron Power) from buccaneer to pirate hunter. This conversion begins with Waring's infatuation for a British Lord's daughter, Lady Margaret (Maureen O'Hara), who promises him on their first meeting that she will see him hang from the gallows. Their relationship develops in tandem with Waring's reluctant acceptance of his role as state agent under the direction of Captain Morgan (Laird Cregar), recently appointed governor of Jamaica.

The film ends after Waring has defeated his former comrades who refused to cease pirating, and the defeat allows Waring and Margaret to finally kiss and acknowledge their union. Captain Morgan closes the film, commenting,

"There he goes; it's the end of the Spanish Main."



By the end of the film, Waring has rid the Caribbean of pirates and won the heart of the pirate-hating Lady Margaret.



In *Captain Blood*, Peter Blood resigns as captain when his crew will not blindly follow him into danger for the sake of his love interest.



Captain Blood and his love Arabella ensconced in the Governor's mansion. Naturally, while they end in the aristocratic surroundings they were

While the “Spanish Main” signifies the territory claimed by Spain during the early colonization of the Americas, in Morgan’s dialogue it means the pirate way of life, incompatible with monogamy and domesticity. *The Black Swan* makes strikingly clear the motivations of the pirate hero, as Waring’s conversion from pirate to heroic pirate hunter intertwines the pursuit of his former comrades and the abandonment of his casual, rough sexuality.

Within these films, pirate rebellion becomes the defeat of a particular villain, not a revolt against a corrupt system, and it ends in monogamy. The pretexts for the pirate hero come primarily from the novels of Rafael Sabatini, such as *Captain Blood: His Odyssey*, *The Fortunes of Captain Blood*, *The Sea Hawk*, and *The Black Swan*. Sabatini excelled in creating heroes who were “good and innocent men turned, through no fault of their own, to fugitives and outlaws” (Voorhees 201). The heroes’ goal is to prove that they have, in the words of *Captain Blood*, the “rags of honour” (Sabatini 169). Of course, they never act in such a way as to actually seem dishonorable, but their status as “pirates” prompts the love interests’ initial disdain and rejection. In this way as well, these films fit within the melodramatic mode, which

“tends to become the dramaturgy of virtue misprized and eventually recognized...the drama of recognition” (Brooks 27).

The pirate overcomes his love interest’s initial condemnation by devotion to the woman, which, in Sabatini’s novels, is the “only religion of a hero” (Voorhees 201). Monogamous heterosexuality spurs the fight against piracy while guaranteeing the pirate has a conscience, belief in justice, and sense of patriotism. After pirates have accepted the yoke of monogamy, they can fulfill their duty as legitimate defenders of liberty and country, but only after. As David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson observe, the classical Hollywood film features at least two interrelated lines of action, one almost always a heterosexual romance (16). In the pirate film, the resolution of the heterosexual romance invariably involves the renunciation or transcendence of piracy, intimately wedding the pirate’s redemption as legitimate citizen with the romantic action line.

Although, as Richard E. Bond has demonstrated, these films often modeled extralegal behaviors for U.S. audiences that were in line with the democratic principles and military actions of the U.S. government in the interwar and postwar years (309), the films, like the U.S. government, routinely subverted egalitarian and democratic decision-making. Importantly, in these scripts pirate heroes repeatedly undermine the crew’s democratic decisions for the sake of their love interest. In *Captain Blood* (1935), the eponymous character played by Errol Flynn goes against the desires of his crew so he can return to Port Royal, where they are wanted for piracy. His decision to endanger all their lives is a paradoxical attempt to demonstrate to his love interest, Arabella Bishop (Olivia de Havilland), that he is not simply “a thief and a pirate.” The film ends with Blood becoming the governor of Barbados, where he was once a slave (slavery and monarchical tyranny forced him into piracy). The film ends before Blood must oversee the same the slave auctions and plantations he fled from (Bond 314-315), containing his revolt in a closing two shot.

born into, his crew remains on the ship.

In the end, *Captain Blood* reintegrates its hero into the world he fought against without changing that world. Rather than structural transformation, the film advocates a change of management:

“History in this film is used as a setting to allow for daring adventures while reinforcing a particular social order that is being menaced...the hero confronts the destabilizing force to reaffirm a well-ordered community” (Gerassi-Navarro 137).

In this respect, the pirate is similar to the hero of the western and the noir film, in that they uphold the legal systems and social institutions yet exist outside them (Cawelti 245). Unlike the marginal figures of those other genres, the pirate ultimately reintegrates into society: whereas the cowboy rides back into the wilderness and the detective returns to his lonely office and bottle of scotch, the pirate hero ends the film in the arms of his beloved.

Pre-cinema, pirates were romantic symbols because they resisted class-based injustice, not because they reaffirmed “a well ordered community” and upheld heterosexual coupling. The rewriting of class-based rebellion undermines their role as social bandits, the very role that contributed to their popular celebration during the 18th and 19th century. Not surprisingly, many of the pirate heroes in these films are from the aristocracy or positioned superior to the men under their command (Earle 8; Bond 314). As “nobility allows the abuse of power” (Turley 39), these gentlemen pirates have a class position that allows them to flaunt the law and reenter legitimate society, unlike social bandits who can only live short lives on the margin.

In order to facilitate this reintegration, the films downplay the pirate protagonists’ pillaging of merchant ships and finally have them discard the activity. *Captain Blood* mitigates Blood’s violence against merchant sailors by collapsing his piracy into a short montage of sword fights, hiding the human damage caused by forcibly boarding and subduing another ship.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



In *The Crimson Pirate*, the quartermaster Humble Bellows continually complains that they are not engaged in piracy but other activities: gun running (which is “business”), not molesting a fair maiden, “letting a fat fish off the hook” (letting rebels go instead of ransoming them), and not being willing “to sell [out one’s] friend, his sweetheart, or his mother.”



The Crimson Pirate ends not with the pirates sailing away to pillage new shores, but with a close up of the Crimson Pirate embracing the rebel leader’s daughter, with whom he sided against his own crew.

The Crimson Pirate is the most self-conscious film in regards to its abandonment of piracy, with a running commentary on what is *not* piracy. The quartermaster, Humble Bellows (Torin Thatcher), protests throughout the film that the crew has strayed from piracy by helping rebels. Though “piracy” according to Bellows is stereotypically dastardly, his interruptions foreground that the film does not repeat its initiating act of piracy. Eventually he is unable to remain in a pirate film and volunteers for a suicide mission, stating, “If I can’t live like a pirate, I’ll die like one.” Announcing the cessation of piracy upfront, the film begins with an extradiegetic monologue in which the main character, the Crimson Pirate (Burt Lancaster), declares,

“You’ve been shanghaied aboard for the last cruise of the Crimson Pirate.”

In the two films featuring prominent female pirates, the women not only must cease pirating, they must also go through a process of feminization. In *Against All Flags* (1952), Spitfire Stephens (Maureen O’Hara), a pirate captain of the mythical Liberia, undergoes feminization at the hands of Brian Hawke (Errol Flynn), an English officer pretending to be a pirate. Through her love of Hawke, Stephens betrays her pirate brethren, abandons her aggressive sexuality, and ends up a prisoner of the British, dependent on Hawke for her freedom and broken to his will. No longer called Spitfire, but rather by her *real name*, Prudence, Stephens ends in the arms of her British spy.

The eponymous Anne (Jean Peters) of *Anne of the Indies* (1951) begins as the plague of the English, a pirate so cruel and fierce that all believe her to be a man. Very quickly though, her love for the suave Pierre François LaRoche (Louis Jourdan), a French merchant captain pretending to be a pirate to capture her, undermines her authority and mission to destroy the English. Anne’s transformation entails receiving training from LaRoche on how to dress like a lady and leads to the betrayal of her mentor and surrogate father Blackbeard. Yet unlike Prudence, she does not intend to give up piracy, and the film concludes as she sacrifices herself and her entire crew to ensure that her former lover and his wife survive. As they go from self-serving rogues to dependent, “love blind fools” (*Anne of the Indies*), the female pirates of these two films reflect the ideological pressure placed upon women in the post-war period to abandon the independence they gained through wartime employment (Chafe 178-193; Cowan 203-207).

The pirate rebel/hero and the pirate criminal/villain thus signify radically different relationships to the act of piracy. Whereas the pirate hero journeys to respectability and monogamy through the eradication of piracy, the pirate villain embraces it as a means for sadism. The villain is a static and unchanging presence, committing piracy not for economic profit but for the pure love of brutality. He can neither develop nor regret; only persist in his corruption, and as such must be purged from the world for narrative closure. The pirate hero however, is capable of change, love, and



In *Against All Flags* Brian Hawke teaching Spitfire Stephens how ladies “attract the attention of the gallants.” The female pirate’s domestication begins with lessons on femininity.



Stephens goes from a pirate captain who takes pleasure from men to a woman needing rescue.



redemption. His piracy within the films, though decried by his love interest, is often off screen, never brutal, and forgotten when he rejoins the now corrected society. The female pirate, when she appears, can persist under the supervision of a man.

The liberty of the temporary pirate

As the pirate film denies the radical democratic order pirates constructed on board the stolen merchant ship, it instead transforms discourses of pirate liberty into gender transformation. In several films, temporary pirates find themselves underneath the Jolly Roger, absorbing the pirates’ agency and masculinity and thus inverting the film’s original relations. Pirate liberty manifests itself here only as a trace, as a temporary fracture, localized around the masculinization of a character.

In *The Princess and the Pirate*, Sylvester the Great (Bob Hope) travesties and impersonates pirate Captain Barret (Victor McLaglen), usurping the captain’s masculine authority. Dressing in the guise of the vicious pirate, this pirate drag disrupts the narrative logic and turns Sylvester’s impotence (symbolized by a piece of celery going limp in his hand at the sight of Barret) into courage. Although Hope’s character (and onscreen persona) never fully loses his comical timidity, during his brief impersonation as pirate captain he becomes gruff and commanding, inspiring fear and awe.

Thus, the key moment in the temporary pirate films occurs when the protagonist assumes the pirate’s place, either by joining the pirate crew or as in *The Princess and the Pirate* by impersonation. The protagonist occupies the position only temporarily, however, and the pirate ship or the pirate’s outfit functions as a space for the protagonist to redefine their position within the diegetic world before ultimately giving up the position. The symbolic importance of the pirate within these films is indicated by the constant use of the pirate’s name or simply the word “pirate” in the film titles.

Captain Kidd’s Kids is an early, blatant slapstick example of this type. This 1919 comedy short directed by Hal Roach relates the story of the Boy (Harold Lloyd) as he tries to follow his fiancé to the Canary Islands after her mother prohibits their marriage. In a dream, he encounters female pirates (Captain Kidd’s Kids of the title), with the captain and first mate played by the same actors as the Mother and the fiancée. The animosity between the Boy and Mother is repeated, with the Captain forcing the Boy into servitude and humiliation. Eventually male pirates overrun the ship and the Boy summons the courage to rescue his love. Once awake and strengthened by his encounter with dream pirates, he threatens the Mother with physical violence and reunites with his beloved.

After the dream sequence, the Boy is suddenly free from matriarchal authority, as is his fiancée. The mother’s power is replaced by the boy’s newfound masculinity, a masculinity that materialized through his encounter with pirates. The boy changes from the cause of disruption (slapstick pratfalls and miscommunication) to the source of order, defeating the male pirate crew and saving his fiancée. This temporary, oneiric empowerment translates into action, allowing him to dominate the castrating mother and resolve the narrative. This transformation’s gendered nature, and its ability to subvert the reigning relations of the non-dream world, recalls the utopian desire for liberty associated with pirates,

Anne of the Indies. Pierre François LaRoche, pretend pirate and spy for the British, teaching Captain Anne Providence how to act like a wench and “wait for men to make the moves.”



Anne of the Indies. Anne in her final act, sacrifices herself so the man she loves and his wife can survive.



Bob Hope in *The Princess and the Pirate*, first in drag hiding from pirates, then in pirate drag defeating them.

though channeled into the plot and the character’s lack of action.

In both historical and fictional accounts, the sea is a masculine space, a place to “make a man” (Rediker 110). Seafaring was and continues to be a male-dominated profession, and the enlightenment’s gendering of social space strengthened the connection between the ship and masculinity (Creighton viii-xi). The pirate, as the aggressive, violent, hypermasculine anti-hero of the sea, furthers this connection, yet as Isabell Karreman has argued, the overwhelming excess of pirate masculinity can become effeminacy. Adopting Eve Sedgwick’s notion of gender identities as “threshold effects,” Karreman demonstrates through historical and literary analysis how

“the quantitative augmentation of manliness, namely [the pirate’s] conspicuous display of fierceness and physical prowess, can suddenly become visible as a qualitative difference, as something else altogether” (3).

Pirate hypermasculinity, by pushing masculine gender performance to excess, becomes effeminacy because it reveals the performative nature of all gendered behavior. Within the films under discussion, however, pirate gender performance remains relatively constrained, rarely crossing the threshold between masculinity and femininity. Instead, the film pirates are the threshold, the demarcation between the normal world and another, freer world crossed into by the protagonist. Whereas patriarchal ideology holds that gender aligns monolithically with physical sex, pirates activate the continuum of possible human behavior, changing effete boys into men, as in *Captain Kidd’s Kids*, or correcting female behavior.

In the *Frenchman’s Creek* (1944), Dona St. Columb (Joan Fontaine) leaves her incompetent husband and embarks on a romance with a pirate, joining him on raids and dressing as a pirate. However, when he asks her to leave with him, she declines, returning to her family and her role as mother. Her experiences, rather than liberating her, finally reveal her proper place: the home. The liberty of the pirate ship exists as a potential, but one primarily dictated by the era’s gender norms.

However, the narratives’ patriarchal thrust is not absolute. Vincente Minnelli’s *The Pirate* (1948), one of the famed Freed Unit’s musicals, shows an alternative possibility. Manuela (Judy Garland) has an ongoing fantasy about the dread pirate, Mack the Black Macoco. As Manuela is about to marry the town mayor, the traveling actor Serafin (Gene Kelly) attempts to seduce her. To fit her fantasies, Serafin pretends to be Macoco and takes the town hostage, leading to a series of comic misunderstandings.

The film portrays the reverse metamorphosis of *Captain Kidd’s Kid*, with Serafin morphing from hypermasculine cad to dependent lover. Serafin’s first dance number, “Niña,” establishes him as a philanderer who cannot remain attached to any woman. Yet his autonomy and lack of attachment slowly break down, as he pretends to be a pirate to convince Manuela to join the acting troupe and, secondarily, to love him. In one number, “The Pirate Ballet,” Serafin becomes a fantasy pirate, dancing amongst fire and sliding down rigging *a la* Douglas Fairbanks. Steve Cohan notes that the pleasure of the scene is “the erotic spectacle of Kelly’s scantily clothed body as he twirls and leaps against the fiery red backdrop” (179). The scene’s excesses cross the threshold of hypermasculinity, offering up Kelly’s body to Manuela and the audience.



The Boy, in *Captain Kidd's Kids*, infantilized and incompetent until he meets pirates.



The Captain Mother, slapping around the boy and making him her servant.



The Boy, post pirate encounter, suddenly has the courage to threaten the Mother. His transformation closes the narrative.

Pirate ambiguity shifts the musical numbers from masculinity to femininity, from camp to sentimentality. The machismo of “Niña” becomes the homoerotic appeal of the male body in “The Pirate Ballet” described above, and leads to the admission of love in the sentimental “You Can Do No Wrong.” The remaining musical numbers feature both characters singing in tandem as equals—a reversal from the previously over the top, isolated numbers. Cohan remarks that the plot of *The Pirate* follows a different trajectory than Kelly’s other films:

“As the plot plays itself out, his multilayered masculine impersonations (performer as womanizer as pirate as performer) do not lead to his final disclosure of a more authentic male concealed by the macho mask, as happens in other Kelly musicals” (182).

Instead, the masculine performance is shown inadequate, and the character’s temporarily playing pirate corrects it.

In this film, the camp sensibility of the Freed unit and the flamboyant contradictions of the musical spectacles reveal the constructed nature of pirate hypermasculinity. Imbued with a gay sensibility, it reverses the more common correction of masculine and feminine behavior in the temporary pirate films. Whether aligning with patriarchal notions of acceptable gender performance or undermining them, the temporary pirate enacts a liberating potential localized around gender. The temporary pirate reveals the return of the repressed sexual possibilities and gender performances aboard the pirate ship.

Conclusion

Piracy in cinema is ambivalent. When present, it is villainous, threatening, and excessively violent. Yet it continues on, if only as a trace, in the pirate heroes who combat, erase, and preempt it. The continuance of pirates in cinema, even if disconnected from piracy, testifies to the power of the pirate as a cultural figure. But what is this power? What cultural desires do pirates without piracy tap into?

Martin Fradley proposes that popular culture’s fascination with pirates originates in the desire for

“a malleable fantasy space into which individual and collective yearnings have long been displaced and projected” (300).

For Fradley, these yearnings are primarily sexual, a response to the prohibitions of the “heterosexual matrix” for a “*queer outlaw*” (301). Yet the “piratical imaginary” need not only be about outlawed sexual desire and gender performance.

The projection of cultural transgressions onto the gaps in pirate history is, as Turley observes, intimately wed to the pirate’s status as economic outlaw (41-42). As the films up until the 1960s show, U.S. cinema decreed acts of piracy as iniquitous, but nonetheless relied on the figure of the pirate as a romantic, though highly limited, rebel protagonist. Villainous pirates and reluctant pirates fulfilled the generic requirements of melodrama, with its penchant for Manichean morality and the recognition of virtue. A pirate plot also fit well into The Motion Picture Production Code (1930-1968), with its imperatives that crimes against the law “shall never be presented in such a way as to throw sympathy with the crime [...] or to inspire others



The Frenchman's Creek. Dona St. Columb telling her pirate lover goodbye because she cannot leave her child: "A man may be free if at all costs he will, but a woman, a woman cannot escape for a night and a day."



Minnelli's *The Pirate*: Serafin, the rogue, dancing around the town square, moving from woman to woman, singing, "When I arrive in any town, / I look the ladies up and down, / And when I've picked my fav'rite flame, / This is my patter, no matter her name: / Niña, Niña, Niña, Niña."

with a desire for imitation," that films should never make "criminals seem heroic and justified" ("The Production).

That filmmakers and audiences turned to the pirate to fulfill these requirements speaks to a desire for economic rebellion as contradictory as the cinematic portrayal of pirates. It is highly suggestive that the pirate was continuously present in U.S. cinema through the Gilded Age and the devastation following the great Depression, but that it ceased to speak to audiences during the prosperity which followed World War II. As the United States experienced the rapid expansion of its middle class and union power, as well as the Civil Rights and countercultural movements, production of pirate films slowed to a trickle. The films made in the decades following the 1950s were neither critical nor commercial successes, convincing later filmmakers "that pirate films don't work" (Surrell 118).

The success of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* series and its embrace of "the story sensibilities of the golden age of Hollywood pirate movies" (Shewman 51) has likewise coincided with U.S. and global wealth inequality reaching volatile proportions. It has coincided with the implications of a second gilded age dawning on legislators and the public, with both lauded and largely unsupported grassroots attempts to reverse the effects of the disparity. Are not the pirates of the current series, who fight for freedom from stability, boundaries, and control, similar to global capitalism, which defies prediction, problematizes local, national, and regional boundaries, and undermines attempts at regulation? Are not the very films that represent pirates' economic transgressions entangled in the production and commodification of desire? The celebration of the pirate film during times of economic disparity suggests that pirates answer yearnings both for action against inequality *and* the desire for wealth that inequality provides. Perhaps the pirate film, with its ambivalent relation to economic transgression, answers an equally ambivalent desire, providing audiences with criminals without crime, rebellion without revolution, and liberty without anarchy.

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Serafin dancing the Pirate Ballet, leaving a
“flaming trail of masculinity” across the town.

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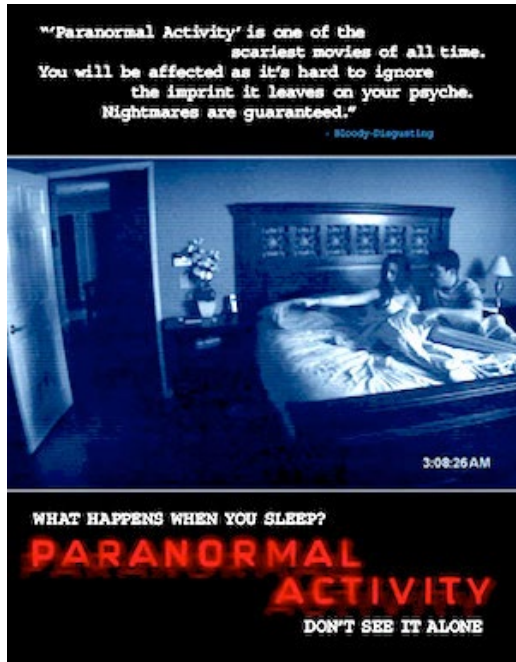
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Paranormal Activity (2008): the first film in the series, shot just before the housing market crash and released just after.

Demon debt: *Paranormal Activity* as recessionary post-cinematic allegory

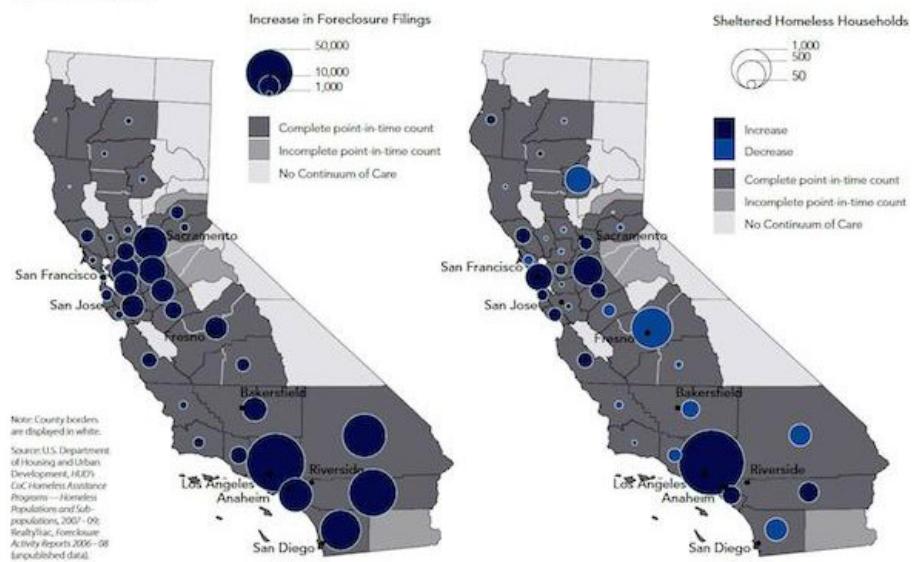
by [Julia Leyda](#)

One of the most striking things about watching the horror movie *Paranormal Activity* nowadays is the way it portrays the U.S. home just before the housing bubble burst, at the height of what President Bush called “the ownership society.” The film is set in September and October of 2006, the same year it was shot on a shoestring budget by writer, director, cinematographer, and editor Oren Peli, but it only gained wide release in 2009 when it was picked up by Paramount-DreamWorks. That year there were 2.8 million foreclosure filings and unemployment reached 10% in the United States (Adler). Made just before the real estate crash and released two years after, at the height of the credit crisis, the movie centers on a young California couple in their large new house. Things begin to go wrong for them when, eerily foreshadowing the housing crisis, a demon begins to toy with them, trying to collect on an ancestor’s Faustian bargain.



U.S. foreclosures climbed steadily during the years bracketing the first two *Paranormal Activity* movies.

Figure 6
CHANGE IN NUMBER OF FORECLOSURE FILINGS, 2006–08, AND SHELTERED HOMELESS HOUSEHOLDS, 2007–09
(by Continuum of Care)



One of the worst-hit states, California saw a record number of foreclosures and increases in the number of people housed in homeless shelters as a result of the housing crash.

The demon-creditor in *Paranormal Activity* resonates within the movie's economic milieu, calling in its debt at the expense of all other concerns. The affective experience of this horror movie aptly foreshadows the credit crisis' "structure of feeling"[1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) of insecurity, helplessness, and dread in the face of enforced compliance with an economic contract. That the demon eschews violence except when severely provoked—preferring intimidation, coercion, and possession—further underscores what it has in common with the consumer finance industry. It doesn't seem to derive pleasure from causing physical pain—setting these movies apart from recent body horror movie subgenres such as torture porn. In fact, it even exhibits playful behavior which perhaps makes it more comfortable communicating with children in the films.



The demon in *Paranormal Activity* bites Katie on

the hip in one scene, but doesn't physically harm any other characters until quite late in the film.



Micah Sloat and Katie Featherston play characters with the same names, adding to the aura of the found footage film's verisimilitude, *Paranormal Activity*.



Drag Me to Hell (2009) explicitly poses a critique of the banking industry's callousness in foreclosing on the homes of those most vulnerable.

To be clear, the *Paranormal Activity* franchise is not explicitly “about” the neoliberal condition of debtor capitalism. There is no indication that the filmmaker consciously constructed his story as an allegory, or, indeed, with any intended message beyond its overt plot about a demon terrorizing a young couple. However, given that the first film was made in the last year of the housing boom, and that its wide release came at the height of the credit crisis, such a cultural interpretation seems unavoidable, despite film critic Dana Stevens’ self-deprecating comment that her reading of the first film, as a “parable about the credit crisis” that is “all about spiritual and ethical debts coming due,” is “possibly crackpot.” I made the same interpretation of the film before reading her review, and I contend that it is decidedly not crackpot. Indeed, while some films explicitly take on the horrors of the housing crisis—such as Sam Raimi’s *Drag Me To Hell*, which premiered in early 2009—and the subsequent films in this franchise were made during the crisis, the first *Paranormal* movie’s housing crisis subtext is largely unintended and all the more telling for that reason.

This paper reads the *Paranormal Activity* franchise as an ongoing post-cinematic allegory of debtor capitalism, and it raises these issues through three levels of analysis that interpenetrate one another. To begin, I examine the ways in which gender, race, and class coalesce within the domestic space of the twenty-first-century U.S. home. In these movies, the home appears noticeably generic, similar to the way the central female characters are portrayed as nearly interchangeable. Second, a formal analysis of the movies’ post-cinematic aesthetic calls attention to their cinematography and editing, which both portray and employ digital technologies that have become commonplace in most U.S. homes, as well as crucial in the global circulation of information and capital. The final section looks at the incorporation of immaterial labor in the marketing of the first film in particular, through transmedia paratexts and engagement of horror fans’ social media activity in the cultural production of the *Paranormal Activity* brand.

Demon domestic: 21st-Century horror at home

The first movie centers on Katie, an English major, and her partner Micah, a day trader. They are a young, white, middle-class couple who have just moved into what several reviewers call their “starter home,” implying that it is the first in a series of houses that they will own over the course of their lives. The movie’s action takes place exclusively in this house, captured within the tight frame of a home video camera, producing a claustrophobic effect of isolation and imprisonment—in stark contrast to any idealized notion of the family home as a sign of stability and refuge from the outside world. The movie, seemingly shot entirely on Micah’s home video camera, documents the incidents of daily life and paranormal activity in the house, which culminate in the demon-possessed Katie killing Micah.

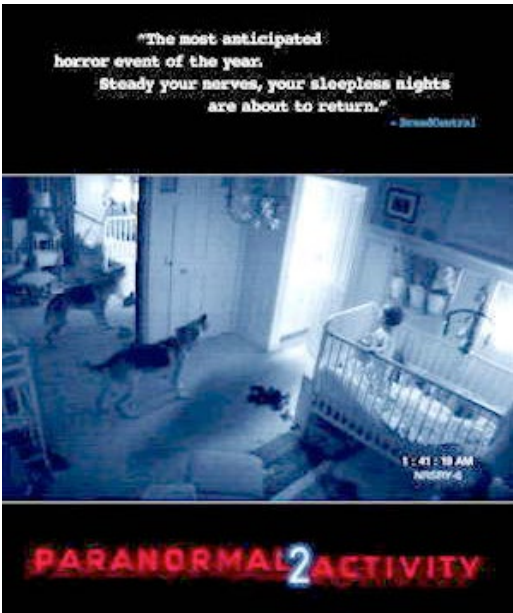
Paranormal Activity 2 was released one year later in 2010, when the United States saw 2.9 million foreclosure filings and 9% unemployment. It, too, is set in a family home in southern California in 2006: this movie tells the story of Katie’s sister Kristi in parallel prequel mode, filling in gaps from the first movie and showing more of what happened beforehand. In the course of the second film, the sisters allude to unusual incidents from their childhood, as Katie tells Kristi about the strange things that have started happening in her new house (viewers who have seen the first film already know how the Katie and Micah situation will turn out). Salient facts also emerge as Kristi’s stepdaughter Ali researches demonology online and deduces that one of Kristi’s ancestors must have made a pact with a demon to deliver the family’s next male child: Kristi’s newborn son, Hunter. Like its predecessor, this movie is comprised of allegedly found footage: this time both home video and data from a series of home security cameras. The visuals produce a particularly enervating form of



Katie attends a university where she majors in English and hopes to become a teacher.



Micah admires himself and his video camera when he isn't pestering Katie with it.



Paranormal Activity 2 (2009): parallel prequel and second film in the series, focusing on Katie's younger sister Kristi.

suspense since the viewer must constantly scan the frame in the absence of any seeming guidance from a director or editor or even (it seems) an actual cinematographer. It ends with the demon-possessed Katie killing Micah and fleeing their house (as we know from the first movie); then she kills Kristi and husband Dan and runs away with Hunter. Although I don't focus on them here, the two subsequent films, *Paranormal Activity 3* and *Paranormal Activity 4*, show the two sisters in their childhood and involve other characters such as their parents and grandmother.

Tim Snelson points out that the last U.S. boom in paranormal movies occurred during a similar moment of national decline, at the end of the recession- and inflation-plagued 1970s. Back then, anxieties about economic and social upheavals, including feminism and the sexual revolution as well as Watergate and the Vietnam War, fueled a cycle of possession and haunted house films such as *The Exorcist* (1973) and *The Amityville Horror* (1979). In the haunted house movies, families experienced hauntings that were place-bound to their homes: investigation revealed that ancient burial grounds and past gory crimes committed on the site in the past had caused the paranormal torments those families underwent. These suffering families demonstrate Natasha Zaretsky's argument that in the crisis-ridden 1970s, "the family served as the symbol for the nation itself" as "both perpetrator and victim, as the site where the origins of national decline could be discovered and where the damages wrought by it could be assessed" (4). Families in 70s haunted house / possession films underwent agonizing paranormal experiences but more often than not survived intact and still together, reinscribing the value of a strong family in times of national crisis. In contrast, unlike in that cycle of films, the demon in the *Paranormal* movies consistently destroys families through death, kidnapping, and possession. Also unlike the conventional horror movie hauntings, the demon was never human and has no attachment to a particular site or structure—this mobility echoes the increasing mobility of Americans today, a point I develop further in a later section. This supernatural being attends primarily to women and children in its communications and behaviors, and no male characters (so far) have succeeded in defeating it, with or without the help of religious or other experts (as in *The Exorcist*).

Horror movies in the twenty-first century have shown a marked tendency to appeal to female as well as male spectators, and one remarkable result has been an increase in strong, intelligent horror movie heroines. As Pamela Craig and Martin Fradley point out, a hallmark of recent U.S. horror cinema is an

"overt courting of a female demographic which both refers back to and updates the proto-feminism of the slasher film's Final Girl from the late 1970s and early 1980s" (87).

Carol Clover identified the trope of the Final Girl as the lone female survivor of the conventional slasher horror film, a girl whom Clover describes as "boyish," "virginal," competent and paranoid, usually with an androgynous name (204). Some examples of revised Final Girl characters include television's Buffy of vampire-slaying fame and Sidney in the *Scream* franchise, each of whom emerges victorious despite being "feminine" and sexually active. Unlike contemporary descendants of the solitary Final Girl figure, however, Katie and Kristi conform to more stereotypically feminine, retrograde roles: neither has a job, both usually defer to their male partners, and neither takes an aggressive role in eliminating the demon.

The postfeminist traits of Katie and Kristi appear more pronounced when contrasted with earlier and later generations of women in their family. We meet their mother Julie and grandmother Lois in *Paranormal Activity 3*, which portrays career woman Julie, supporting her boyfriend and daughters Katie and

Kristi in the late 80s, much to the disapproval of her domineering mother. Indeed, it was Lois' aggressive demonic entrepreneurship—in making a deal with a demon—that created the state of indebtedness that dogged her family for generations. In effect, Lois borrowed against a future male descendent, creating a hereditary obligation shouldered unknowingly by her granddaughters when Kristi bears a son.

Young adult viewers, whom the movie's marketing campaign directly targets (more on this below), might find it difficult to sympathize with passive women like Katie and Kristi whose partners disregard their wishes and advice about the demon, positioning them as postfeminist female horror movie leads rather than as more assertive and independent Final Girls. Interestingly, the teenaged girl characters with similar, androgynous names in the second and fourth films, Kristi's step-daughter Ali in *PA2* and Alex, the adopted sister to Hunter (now named Wyatt) in *PA4*, take on many of those Final Girl characteristics that Craig and Fradley indicate are having a resurgence: they are independent, intelligent, and active, in contrast with the older and more gender-normative Katie and Kristi.[2] Teenagers Ali and Alex also wield more power in their relationships with their male peers—confiding in them, enlisting their help, sharing and communicating through technological devices more comfortably, and struggling to understand what is happening to their families independently of their parents.



Sisters Katie and Kristi, *Paranormal Activity 2*.



The parallel prequel narrative in *Paranormal Activity 2* assumes that we have seen the first film and reminds us of its ending.

Despite the inclusion of refreshing “new” Final Girl figures Ali and Alex, however, the *Paranormal Activity* movies are clearly postfeminist, fitting the representational regime of gender relations that coincided with the economic upturn of the 90s and featured a superficial nod to the gender equality for which 70s feminists fought, while at the same time deemphasizing economic equality, often removing women from the workplace, and centering on heterosexual relationships, domesticity, and consumerism (Negra 4). Made in the context of the housing bubble, the first movie is poignant in its prescience, introducing the fairly traditional young couple, Katie and Micah, in their oversized, anonymous-looking house surrounded by consumer goods, yet in the second movie, post-crash, we meet an extremely similar young couple, Kristi and Dan, in an unnervingly similar, yet even more gender-normative, domestic setting. Neither of the women works outside the home, and both are supported by their male partners, who are also portrayed in several scenes making sexist remarks and rolling their eyes at the women.

In their characterizations of Katie and especially Kristi, these movies bear out what Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker argue: that times of recession are also often times of gender retrenchment—when women's role in the family home is reinscribed in the face of unemployment and scarcity—as if “equality is a luxury that can no longer be afforded.” In recessionary popular culture, women are more often cast in caregiving roles that emphasize their domestic resourcefulness and protectiveness. Thus Katie and Kristi in the *Paranormal Activity* movies adopt maternal attitudes toward the men, tolerating the men's childish and sexist behavior. Indeed, the first three films feature three heterosexual couples in which the women strive in different ways to protect their families within the domestic realm of the home, and in which the men consistently and defiantly behave in ways that endanger them all. Even in the third movie, set in the pre-recession 1980s, Dennis conceals videotaped evidence of the demon from his girlfriend, Katie and Kristi's mother Julie, because he doesn't want to frighten her, thus endangering the whole family. In these ways the first two *Paranormal* movies conform to Tim Snelson's

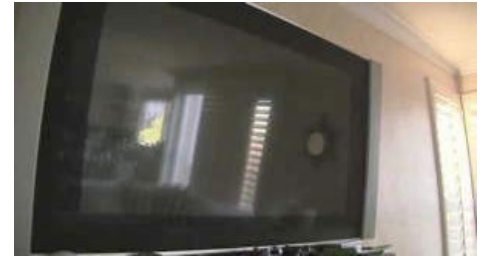
argument that post-crash domestic horror “expose[s] the inequalities of recession-era households,” while this

“centering of housewives and mothers as the only defense against the (re)possession of the U.S. home might ultimately act to reinforce the ideology of female domesticity.”

Giving their male partners the upper hand in domestic and economic arrangements allows the men to justify disrespecting the postfeminist characters Katie and Kristi in various ways that lead to more danger.



Paranormal Activity 1. Micah and Katie's furniture is characterless and looks like it belongs in a mid-range hotel. The movie displays the couple's large, suburban home and its furnishings, including a big rear-projection TV,



Paranormal Activity 2. Dan and Kristi's is more indicative of aspirational middle-class tastes catered to by such companies as Pottery Barn. This flat screen TV is one of several in the home of Dan and Kristi.



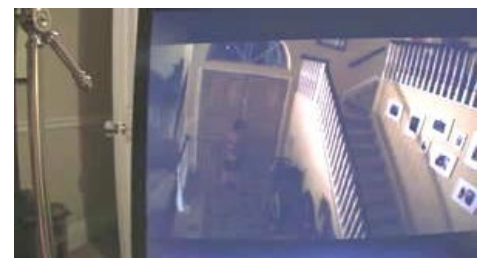
Paranormal Activity 2. Exterior of Dan and Kristi's house, slightly grander than Micah and Katie's, in a similar new subdivision in southern California.



Paranormal Activity 2. Dan Rey hires a home security firm to install multiple surveillance cameras after strange things start happening around the house.



Ali Rey, Kristi's stepdaughter, researches demons online in *Paranormal Activity 2*.



Paranormal Activity 2. Ali shows her father Dan the surveillance footage of the demon slamming the door and locking her out.

Katie and Kristi manifest the postfeminist tendency toward retreatism, as Diane Negra defines it: women choosing not to work, depending on parents or male partners for economic support, while tending to the family and the running of the household (15). In the 1990s, this retreat to the domestic sphere often figured as a personal choice, as career women opted out of the stressful world of work for the rewards of the home; after the housing crash, women appear more frequently as the stalwart force holding the family together. Accordingly, the first movie is centered around the bedroom, pointing to the centrality of the romantic relationship between Katie and Micah. Echoing Katie's retreat to the

domestic and shifting interest from romance to nurturing, much of the paranormal activity in the second movie occurs in Kristi's kitchen and nursery. The demon's target, stay-at-home mom Kristi, spends most of her time in these two rooms. In the earliest scenes, we see the demon behaving as if it knows it is being recorded, spinning the baby's play-mobile when Kristi steps out and stopping it abruptly just before she returns. The movie's low-budget domestic horror works powerfully with minimal special effects: one of the biggest "jumps" in the movie occurs as Kristi sits placidly in the kitchen, when suddenly every cupboard door flies open violently at the same moment. The demon assaults the quiet of these otherwise quotidian moments in the most feminine-coded spaces.



Paranormal Activity 2. Dan's condescending expression as he mansplains to Ali that it was just the wind, despite her insistence that there was no wind at the time and all the windows and other doors in the house were closed.



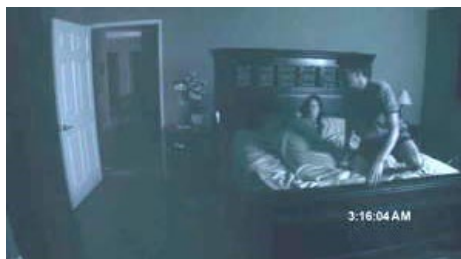
Paranormal Activity 2. Dan mansplaining to a disbelieving Kristi how the hanging pot rack could have slipped off its apparently stable and intact metal hooks...



...then mocking her in the pool as Micah videotapes him, explaining drily that anything that happens around the house causes Kristi to jump "straight to ghost" for an explanation, revealing that he hasn't really listened to her explanations of the demon (not ghost). *Paranormal Activity 2.*



Paranormal Activity 3. Dennis, Julie's boyfriend, lives with her and her daughters, Katie and Kristi.



Paranormal Activity. Micah and Katie's bedroom, the site of much of the movie's paranormal activity, shot on their home video camera with tripod, .



Paranormal Activity 2. Kristi and Ali in the kitchen, where Kristi spends a lot of time, and where several unexplained incidents take place,

Indeed, the retreat implied by Katie and Kristi's domesticity is a central part of the demonic capitalist economy, at least in the first two films. Kristi's maternity means that she performs traditional reproductive labor in bearing and caring for her child, though she has opted out of the formal labor market. Even outside of biological motherhood, Katie and Martine, the domestic worker in *PA2*, also

participate in reproductive labor. Katie, although child-free, expresses her desire to be a teacher and shows genuine affection for her baby nephew; she later becomes a kind of foster-mother of demon-children in *Paranormal Activity 4*. Martine is condescendingly called a “nanny” at the beginning, when in fact she straddles the public / private divide as she performs physical housework in the form of laundry, cooking, and cleaning, as well as affective labor in her mutual emotional bonding with the children, all figured as simply waged work for Kristi and Dan’s family.

In her study of immigrant women’s domestic labor and its representations in popular culture, Mary Romero demonstrates,

“Purchasing the caretaking and domestic labor of an immigrant woman commodifies reproductive labor and reflects, reinforces, and intensifies social inequalities.... Qualities of intensive mothering, such as sentimental value, nurturing and intense emotional involvement, are not lost when caretaking work is shifted to an employee (Silbaugh 1996).” (Romero 1992)

The ironic hierarchies of gender, race, and class in *Paranormal Activity 2* crystallize around the figure of Martine, whom Ali sincerely refers to as a part of the family when she learns that her father Dan has fired the housekeeper. Patriarch Dan exercises his power over Martine when he learns that, despite his instructions, she has continued to burn smudges of dried herbs around their house in her efforts to cleanse the space of the evil spirits she believes abide there.

Yet the figure of the Latina domestic worker, although marginalized in her classed and raced position within the domestic economy, also functions similarly to other female figures such as Katie, Kristi, and Alex: as a source of information about the demon. In his desperation, Dan recalls the fired care worker back to his home to ask for her help; Martine obligingly teaches Dan how to shift the demonic attention from Kristi to Katie, expertise that she appears to have acquired in addition to her domestic skills. Ungrudgingly, Martine offers her advice and assistance to the family that had so recently cast her aside, yet neither she nor Dan realizes that the demon’s ultimate goal is to obtain possession of Hunter regardless of which sister it instrumentalizes to get him. Despite successfully switching the demon from Kristi to Katie, the possessed Katie promptly kills Dan in the living room and Kristi in the nursery and absconds with baby Hunter.



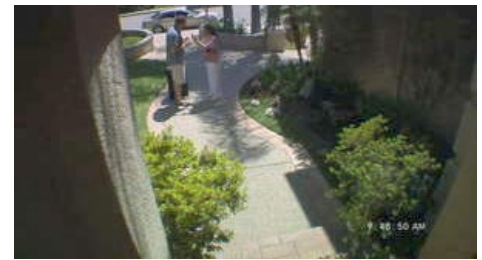
Paranormal Activity 2. Hunter’s nursery, another of Kristi’s frequent locations and site of many demonic interventions.



Paranormal Activity 2. Martine, the ostensibly Catholic, Latina nanny with expert knowledge of demons, in the kitchen preparing food for the family.



Paranormal Activity 2. Hunter, Kristi, and Martine, share a peaceful moment together as a quasi-family. The costumes in the films are casual and unremarkable, lending no specificity to the characters' personalities, as if they all shopped from the same J. Crew catalog.



Paranormal Activity 2. Dan and Martine frequently argue about the existence of the demon and what should be done about it, causing Dan to fire her and then ask her for help when he finally realizes the demon is real.



Paranormal Activity 2. Demon-possessed Katie kills Dan and Kristi...

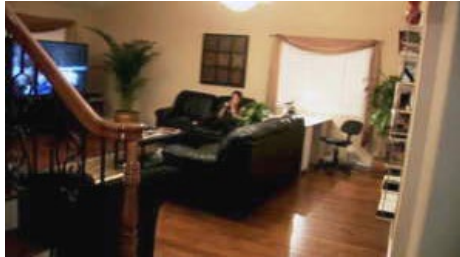


...then kidnaps her nephew Hunter.

Demon day-to-day: ordinary horror

Descended from the Gothic novel, paranormal horror focuses attention on the private home as a domestic site: in which families live, in which power hierarchies co-exist with complex emotional ties, and in which paranormal beings terrorize humans, showing that daily life is both normal and paranormal. Ordinarity gone awry is the mode of many horror movies, and the *Paranormal Activity* series is no exception. Everything in these movies appears unremarkable, even generic—from the houses themselves, newly built suburban tract homes, to the standard bland furnishings and costumes. Nothing stands out as unique, making it easy to imagine that the movie took place in a real home and that it could take place in any home. These lifestyles as depicted in the films appear to be typical upper-middle-class, white, and suburban, with plenty of square footage as befits the expansionist U.S. dream of home ownership.

The houses of Katie and Kristi are so similar that they appear interchangeable; moreover, the sisters themselves are also ordinary. For many viewers, their ordinarity led to difficulties in distinguishing Katie from Kristi, particularly when viewing the movies one year apart—both have dark hair and are close in age, and they have similar names. When Kristi's husband Dan succeeds in displacing the demon's interest from his wife to her sister Katie, thus explaining in the second film why the events of the first befell Katie, it appears that the sisters are as interchangeable as their houses as far as the demon is concerned. Martine performs domestic work as well, thus demonstrating that one mothering figure can replace another. Baby Hunter is revealed as the demon's rightful property, according to Lois' decades-old contract: he becomes the currency with which it can be paid off. The films never make clear precisely what was gained from the pact, only that it ensured the family some amount of financial gain. Lois' home in *Paranormal Activity 3* is large and includes outbuildings as well as a garden, so it appears that she continues to live comfortably. But regardless of the details of Lois' compact with the demon, in the film narrative even the baby—the material result of the women's reproductive labor—is transformed into an object of exchange that is used to pay a debt.



Paranormal Activity. Katie on the nondescript leather sofa in the unremarkable living room.



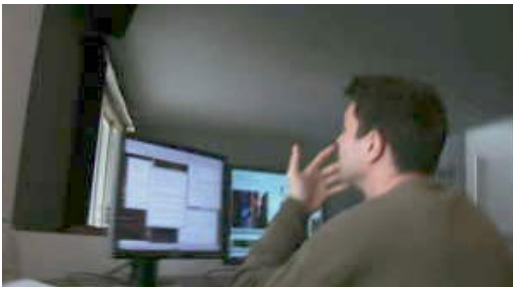
Paranormal Activity 3. Julie prepares for her daughter Katie's birthday party in 1988, captured on boyfriend Dennis's VHS video camera. The homes, the characters, and the costumes in these films are all very ordinary.



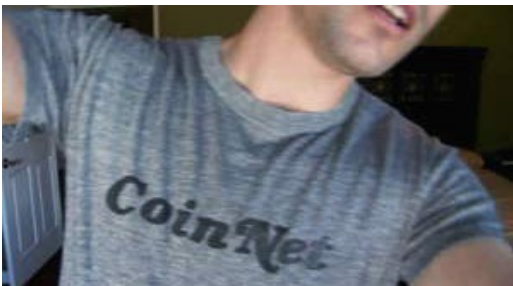
Paranormal Activity 2. Kristi holding son Hunter as an infant.



Paranormal Activity 2. Katie holding nephew Hunter, now a toddler. Note how similar the two women look.



Micah and his home computer, *Paranormal Activity*



Micah in his CoinNet tee, *Paranormal Activity*

In many ways, too, Katie's partner Micah's career as a day trader is predicated on domesticity, ordinariness, and exchange. Many reviewers seem to equate "day trader" with "stockbroker." However, they are not the same: a day trader buys and sells a high volume of stocks from a home computer connected to the Internet, attuned to minimal market movements. As Randy Martin explains,

"day trading came into existence with the 1990s stock market expansion as a function of that confluence between home access to live data on stock price fluctuations and lowered costs per trade" (46).

Instead of having to telephone in trade orders, suddenly Internet brokerage account holders could transact—and get rich—with a mouse click, almost by magic. This practice is a notable example of the financialization of U.S. life since the 90s, as Martin demonstrates, in that it features the privatization and individualization of a finance-centered livelihood while transposing the risks and anxieties of the market onto the domestic space of the home (46). Careers in finance have received scholarly attention in recent decades, often focusing on stockbrokers working for financial services corporations. In film plots, hypermasculinity accompanies the moral perils of high-risk investing—from the first *Wall Street* (1987), to the recent *Margin Call* (2011), a timespan that the

Paranormal series bridges in its four movies (see Negra and Tasker “Neoliberal”; Annesley and Scheele).



Wall Street (1987): Gordon Gecko and the famous tagline, “greed is good,” set a standard for the representation of stockbrokers and investment bankers in Hollywood film.



Margin Call (2011) continues the tradition of portraying employees of high finance corporations as a well-dressed, elite boy’s club.

But distinct from these representations of the high-finance fraternity in their sleek designer suits, popular images of day trading emphasize the solitary, at-home trader. Micah sports casual clothes, including a t-shirt promoting Coin Net (an online precious metals exchange). Instead of competing with colleagues and rivals, day traders are average men who exude “ordinariness” (Martin 49). Micah enjoys spending his money on consumer goods, brandishing a new home video camera that cost him “half of what [he] made” that day. The ordinary-looking lifestyle in the first movie can also be explained in part by the fact that Oren Peli, the filmmaker, used his own new house as its location, including an enormous rear-projection television he bought with the proceeds of his own day trading career in the 90s (Turek).

However, Martin emphasizes the macho albeit solitary egoism of day traders in their compulsion to mask or minimize the (often) massive losses they incur by playing the market so intensively and precariously: “an incessant comparison of success lost” and “hypersensitivity to loss in the eyes of others” characterize the day trader’s persona, whose daily routine is

“repeatable until the money runs out, in which each moment is unique and each day is the same” (46).

Micah’s obsession with recording the demon on time-stamped videos captured in the bedroom where he and Katie sleep, and around the house as they go about their lives, eerily echoes this repetitive day trader lifestyle in digital form. It takes place in the private space of the home, it foregrounds his prowess with digital technology, and it provides him with a chance to be aggressive and successful (although he merely succeeds in provoking the demon which leads to his death).

Indeed, thanks to Micah’s home video camera in *PA1* and the home surveillance cameras in *PA2*, the movies themselves and the seemingly “real” video footage in them are a digitization of the characters and their bodies, as Steven Shaviro has pointed out. Unlike film shot on celluloid, with a digital camera images are converted to strings of numbers, which are then reconstituted algorithmically when the video is played back. In this sense, the “real” people and objects that are filmed digitally are literally reduced to data and digits (Grisham et al.). Shaviro explains how the shift in filmmaking technology also alters the philosophical implications of cinema in the digital age:

“Digital photography is no longer mimetic. The chain of cause and effect is ruptured: no longer does light reflected off an object, and entering a lens, produce analogous chemical changes on a photographic plate. Instead, the stream of light is sampled at precise intervals, and rendered into an abstract binary code (1s and 0s). This abstract code can be easily manipulated and overwritten: which is why it is so simple a task to edit and alter images on a computer.... In digital photography and film, even the most mimetically faithful images are artificial and fictive. There is no longer any ontological distinction between a ‘true’ image and a ‘false’ one.” (“Emotion” 65)

Digitizing the humans in front of the cameras can be seen as a form of abstraction away from materiality, which can be disconcerting; we are left with what Shaviro calls

“the low-level dread and basic insecurity that forms the incessant background to our consumer-capitalist lives today.” (Grisham et al.)

In *PA1*, for example, we see hours of uneventful video showing Katie and Micah

sleeping, in fast forward, punctuated by moments of baffling terror that the characters (and often the audience) never fully understand (Grisham et al.). Even the alleged safety and security of the mother-child relation appears somehow flimsy and insubstantial, like the thin walls of the cheaply made suburban houses that offer no real protection to the families inside from “demonic capital” (Shaviro, in Grisham et al.).

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Demon data: post-cinematic digital aesthetics



Paranormal Activity. Micah annoys Katie with the video camera constantly, whining that she should let him film them having sex or here brush her teeth.



Our increasingly digital world is made up of ones and zeroes.



The Blair Witch Project (1999) is still remembered today as the first of the “found

The *Paranormal Activity* films, as I have shown, exemplify postfeminist recessionary texts in their representations of gender and the domestic; they are also post-cinematic in their interest in the themes and technologies as well as the structures of feeling of the digital age. In the most literal sense, post-cinematic describes the current state of the film industry, in which movies are either shot on digital cameras or transferred to digital formats from film. In addition, they are distributed in digital formats from DVDs and Blu-ray to online streaming platforms such as Netflix and YouTube that can be accessed using mobile devices. Viewers may also see them via television interfaces using digital recording or decoding devices such as Roku and Wii. In his definitive body of work on the post-cinematic, Steven Shaviro argues that with these changes in technology, our lives are changing as well. This happens not only in obvious ways, such as the amount of time we spend online in some form on our myriad devices, but also in how we think about and interact with the world via social media, and how we participate in the digital networks of capital via online banking and investments, cash machine withdrawals, transit system smart cards, and credit and debit card payments. Shaviro argues,

“Digital technologies, together with neoliberal economic relations, have given birth to radically new ways of manufacturing and articulating lived experience” (*Post-Cinematic* 2).

As such, post-cinematic media “generate subjectivity and . . . play a crucial role in the valorization of capital,” just as they draw our attention to the parallel uses of technology in entertainment and finance:

“the editing methods and formal devices of digital video and film belong directly to the computing-and-information-technology infrastructure of neoliberal finance” (*Post-Cinematic* 3).

Today the conversion to the digital of almost every iota of human existence would seem to reduce art and entertainment (film, games), economics (banking, credit), and communication (personal, commercial) to a single plane of intangibility, to the ether. However, at their best, theories of post-cinema resist this notion of vanishment and, on the contrary, strive to engage a materialist critique even when, or precisely when, the object of analysis appears so insubstantial and elusive. Post-cinema is thus bound up in the neoliberal motor of perpetual capitalist expansion and subsumption. By unpacking the aesthetics of post-cinema, this article contributes to that project by trying to foster new film-analytical models that attend to the latest iterations of capital.[3][[open endnotes in new window](#)] I contend that here, in the *Paranormal Activity* movies’ technological form and in their diegesis, the digital is the link between the nightmare of debtor capitalism and the horror of the camera as non-human agent that captures the malevolent actions of the non-human demon.

footage" genre of horror cinema, with its efforts at an amateur, hand-held aesthetic and documentary-style realism.



Cloverfield (2008) continued the found footage horror cycle started by *Blair Witch*, depicting a catastrophic event in New York City.



V/H/S (2012) provoked fans of the found footage horror with its anthology format.



Europa Report (2013) brings the found footage genre to science fiction, depicting a series of mysterious events during space expedition.

Caetlin Benson-Allott places the *Paranormal Activity* films within the recent trend in what she names “faux footage films,” a subgenre of found footage films. Extending and elaborating on the handheld digital aesthetics of *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), the first two *Paranormal* films also “reveal the extent to which the amateur, unpolished technique of faux footage horror represents the psychic boundary between public and private” by allowing access to what are presented to us as rough unedited footage, home movies, and private surveillance videos (Benson-Allott 182). The faux footage film presents allegedly real footage to the audience, most often in genres such as horror, science fiction, or some combination of the two. *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) marks the beginning of a resurgence of this subgenre of films to which the *Paranormal Activity* franchise also belongs; more recent additions to the subgenre include *Cloverfield* (2008), *V/H/S* (2012), and *Europa Report* (2013).

The *Paranormal* movies call attention to the plethora of now ordinary video technologies in the U.S. home, which are increasingly figured as malign (Benson-Allott 186). The video cameras in the movies digitize their human subjects, thus turning something we might call private reality into data. The domestic digital aesthetics of the *Paranormal Activity* franchise are integral to the troubling of the public-private boundary that Benson-Allott indicates. The home-made and faux footage only escalates the horror in these movies as it depicts the penetration of invisible, financialized demon capital into the refuge of the family home.

Many of these films, including the *Paranormal Activity* films, can also be interpreted as “weapons in a format war being fought by copyright holders and pirates over our e-spectatorship” at a time when, thanks to the possibility for rapid digital data transmission via the Internet, piracy has become a major concern of the entertainment industry (Benson-Allott 171). The cycle of faux footage horror at the beginning of this century instills in audiences a sense of fear and anxiety about the “repercussions for watching the wrong video or watching the wrong way,” and thus take their place in a long line of films that make watching films into a dangerous act: *Videodrome* (1983) and *Ringu* (1998) to name only two (Benson-Allott 17). In *Paranormal Activity*, breaking the rules also carries strong punishments. We learn that the demon gets stronger and more aggressive as Micah records it on video and watches the footage, ignoring Katie’s warnings. He childishly continues to break her “rules,” smirking to the camera when he promises he won’t “buy a Ouija board,” fully intending to borrow one. His mockery of her directives parallels the defiance inherent in piracy, although obviously with more severe penalties. Beyond their context within the copyright wars, however, the *Paranormal* films also underscore the dire consequences of defying the rules of debtor capitalism in the digital age.

The Faustian contract that Katie and Kristi’s grandmother made with the demon becomes an engine of deadly destruction as the demon takes possession of what is owed. Lois’ granddaughters now must pay the balance due: Kristi’s son, Hunter. The movies thus dramatize in hyperbolic horror movie style the condition of indebtedness that Maurizio Lazzarato argues

“represents the very heart of neoliberal strategy, [and] now occupies the totality of public space” (38).

Released during the foreclosure crisis in 2009, *Paranormal Activity*



Paranormal Activity. Micah smirking over the Ouija board like a naughty child who knows what he's done.



Carrie Mathison spies on Nicholas Brody and his family using surveillance cameras installed without her CIA supervisor's knowledge on TV's *Homeland*.



Paranormal Activity. The demon toys with us as we watch the sheet billows up over Katie and Micah as they sleep unaware, captured by the video camera.

portrays the horror of a debt that cannot be evaded or expunged, which can lead to the repossession of a cherished object such as the family home, or in this case, a child. Through her reproductive labor and assisted by Martine and Katie, Kristi must assume the debt of her grandmother Lois and pay the demon-creditor what is owed.

The hereditary nature of this particular debt plays on a growing sense of resentment among white, middle-class Americans who are realizing that younger generations will not have access to the same advantages and opportunities as their antecedents did. The debt economy engulfs ever-increasing percentages of personal income, and a record low 14% of Americans believe that today's children will do better than their parents ("New Low"). While at least the belief in upward mobility has long been taken for granted in U.S. life, now it is mainly capital that moves and most often it is leaving. As Randy Martin points out, financialization has ushered in changes in U.S. structures of feeling around the home itself. Whereas owning property used to be a sign of stability for previous generations, it is now a potential vulnerability, and in fact,

"What was once a source of security is now a source of risk" (Martin 31).

The *Paranormal Activity* movies allegorize the way in which possession and re-possession have become horrific concepts in the twenty-first century.

The demon's mobility and invisibility, its ability to navigate the home unseen and to inhabit the body through possession, echo the insidious, digitized mobility of transnational finance capital, which has forced so many homeowners into foreclosure and repossession. Just as the demon demands payment of an ancestor's debt, the predatory mortgage, abstracted beyond verifiable recognition into digitally traded securities, allows an outsider to take away one's very home and hearth. Moreover, the digitization, agility, and decentering of financial systems and instruments make them harder to see or resist; the *Paranormal Activity* movies portray the demon as an elusive, disembodied, yet personalized evil entity. Demonic possession—as well as the transfer of the demon's possessive attention from Kristi to Katie—also recalls the contemporary phenomenon of identity theft, which can have serious repercussions: you can lose all your assets, not to mention ruining your credit rating. These digital forms of theft are only possible in an increasingly data-driven, disembodied, financialized world. The non-human demon, like a bad credit rating or identity theft, trails the sisters throughout their lives until one of them bears a son, which makes it more frightening than a site-specific haunting, in that moving away will not allow them to escape the hostile, disembodied demonic force.

The absence of an embodied evil in the movies invests the video cameras with sinister overtones, raising the complex question of point of view. In this way, too, the movies repurpose the horror convention of de-familiarizing the home as haven to make it a site of terror and the uncanny. Digital video technology—home video, surveillance, and security cameras, in particular—are ubiquitous, ordinary artifacts of contemporary life in the United States and the rest of developed world; "Sinister Surveillance" is even featured as a TV trope on the invaluable wiki of that name, which lists the numerous popular culture texts that incorporate it, including the post-9/11 law enforcement dramas such as *Homeland* (2011-) and *Person of*



Paranormal Activity 2. Possessed Katie enters the house quietly through the front door, in the upper right corner of the screen, and walks over to the sofa where Dan is watching TV with his back to her.



Paranormal Activity 2. A pan on the stove slowly catches fire, setting off the alarm and causing Dan to run downstairs and extinguish it.



Paranormal Activity 2. The ominous-looking night footage of the swimming pool, inhabited only by the cleaning machine.

Interest (2011-).

Although security cameras ostensibly exist in order to make us feel safer, reviewing the interminable, repetitive videos in the *Paranormal* movies produces more anxiety for us and the characters by revealing what a character can never see firsthand: herself sleeping and what goes on while she sleeps. Watching the speeded-up videos of Katie and Micah sleeping as lights switch on and off, the door moves closed and open again, and the sheet billows up around their bodies, the footage emphasizes their unconsciousness and vulnerability. Moreover, while a sleeper can never see herself from outside, the demon, like the camera, can; it can also move her around, inhabit her body, and then look out from within her body. However, unlike conventional horror cinema's use of point of view to increase suspense, such as filming a sequence from the killer's perspective observing the unsuspecting victim, this camera does not represent any human point of view. Positioning the camera in a non-human POV, the movie produces an uncanny sense of helplessness; we occupy neither the demon's perspective nor the sleeping characters', but that of a machine, the diegetic digital camera.

In the *Paranormal* movies, digital modes of production condition the kinds of affect the movie generates: their cinematography and editing corral us into certain perceptive modes. The omniscience of the "unmanned" cameras, however, begins to resemble a form of mastery over the humans—the cameras are superior, all-seeing witnesses. They force people—characters and spectators—to watch helplessly. An almost sadistic tone emanates from this kind of enforced and hobbled surveillance. Unlike other kinds of horror that emphasize the excessive wounding of the flesh, bodies are *not* mutilated or tortured in these movies; all of the *Paranormal Activity* movies are surprisingly free from gore and protracted violence. Yet they still fit the classification of body genres, as Linda Williams defines them: "trashy" movies of the horror, melodrama, or pornography genres that provoke strong physical responses from the audience (4).

There are plenty of "jumps"—involuntary physical expressions of fear and surprise in the *Paranormal* series, but the movie also controls the viewer's body in other ways. For example, the camera fixed on its tripod in *Paranormal Activity* and the static security cameras in each room in *Paranormal Activity 2* force the spectator to scan the frame continuously, because the fixed camera cannot highlight action or details using close-ups or editing, as in classical cinema. Calling attention to the film's form in a way that makes viewers more anxious and uncomfortable, this camerawork produces a form of digital dramatic irony. That is, when recording while humans are sleeping, absent, or looking the other way, the always-on cameras "know" and "see" more than the characters, and thereby we viewers do as well, as long as we assiduously do the extra work and pick out by our own effort what is important in the frame. In the next section, I examine some of the other kinds of extra work the *Paranormal* movies assign to their viewers.

**Demon branding:
immaterial fan labor and blurred boundaries**



Paranormal Activity 2. The poolbot spontaneously leaps into the air, producing a jump in the audience and characters but not caused by the demon.

Paramount-DreamWorks has built the *Paranormal Activity* franchise from an ultra-low-budget production into a blockbuster series; the films thematize and exemplify the extent of digital technology's permeation into contemporary U.S. life not only in their story and cinematic form, but also in their marketing and branding. Picking up the rights to the first *Paranormal Activity* movie, which Peli made for \$15,000, the studio reportedly paid \$350,000; subsequently, the movie has grossed over \$193 million worldwide ("*Paranormal Activity*"). Despite the studio's debate over whether to include marketing costs (\$10 million) when calculating return on investment, the first *Paranormal Activity* movie is widely considered the most profitable movie ever made, and subsequent movies in the franchise have set other records (O'Carroll). But still uncounted for is the added value of the fan labor as a significant component in marketing the movie. The series' specifically twenty-first-century variety of dynamic online fan participation runs serves as a contrast—and perhaps antidote—to the movies' affective register, consisting of helplessness, fear, and anxiety. Just as the movies' post-cinematic aesthetics enact a peculiar form of bodily control over viewers—making us actively search within the frame to locate suspicious movement—the movie's branding entails a variety of viewer activities in addition to simply buying access to the film (as a cinema ticket, DVD purchase or rental, or streaming event).



For each succeeding film, the *Paranormal Activity* franchise uses the same Tweet Your Scream campaign on Twitter, using the same Twitter handle, @tweetyourscream.

One of the reasons the PA franchise became so successful may be that it has been supported by the young horror movie fan's social media

communications: the public, performative online behaviors that we practice every day on Twitter and Facebook, sharing shaky homemade video and private domestic scenes with our so-called “friends.” The new media publicity campaign for the first film, under producer Jason Blum and spear-headed by the PR company Eventful, encouraged fans to click a button on the movie’s website to “Demand It!” promising that those towns with the most clicks would get the movie’s release sooner. Thus the executives could see the buzz around *Paranormal Activity* grow day by day and were able to pinpoint specific locales where it was attracting more attention. Eoin O’Carroll points out that just urging

“the small, initial commitment of clicking on a button makes that person more likely to follow through and go see the film.”

But the other reason the “Demand It!” marketing campaign has been so successful is the way it drafts the fans into unpaid labor as marketers themselves, targeting viewers like themselves. This campaign exemplifies what Sarah Banet-Weiser argues is a hallmark of the new “brand culture” of the twenty-first century, in which

“[c]onsumers contribute specific forms of production via voting, making videos for the campaign, workshopping, and so forth, but the forms of their labor are generally not recognized as labor (e.g., participating in media production, DIY practices, consumer-generated content).” (42; see also Hamilton and Heflin; Jarrett)

Paranormal Activity movie trailer:
Trailer opens explaining that it was shot at a test screening, with captions and night vision video mimicking the film’s aesthetics.



As the horror fans went to the website and clicked the “Demand It!” button, they reinforced their own consumerist desire for the movie, and at the same time demonstrated it publicly for both the movie studio and the rest of the movie’s potential fan base to see, thus contributing to the production of publicity and the market research for the movie. This form of branding, which represents the “intersecting relationship between marketing, a product, and consumers,” is omnipresent today and has penetrated all forms of media and all kinds of products, from running shoes to soft drinks to soap (Banet-Weiser 4).

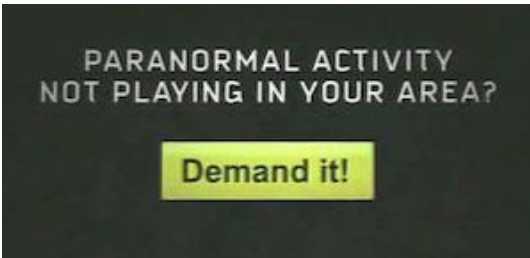
Notably, Blum explains “Demand It!” using a domestic metaphor:

“You bring it home to yourself, instead of feeling that it’s being pushed on you” (Cieply).

By taking an active role in demanding the movie, and taking part in the movie’s PR activities on Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms, fans build “a kind of affective, authentic engagement into the product itself,” participating in the branding campaign instead of just being addressed by it (Banet-Weiser 38). This form of immaterial labor—which binds the consumer to the product through monetized, unpaid online activity—also blurs boundaries between consumers and producers, employing

“the emotive relationships we all have with material things, with products, with content, and seeking to build culture around those brands” (Banet-Weiser 42; 45).

The studio expected it would take weeks to attain one million “Demand It!” clicks, but fervent online horror fans did it in four days (Evangelista). A similarly active marketing role for fans worked through the Twitter campaign using the official *Paranormal Activity* account,



We watch the cinema audience watching Micah.
Shots of audience reactions: suspense...fear...
horror.

@TweetYourScream, to encourage fans to post their reactions.[4]

Indeed, given the widespread practice of piracy among the movie's young target audience, the extraction of immaterial labor online—through Demand It!, Twitter, and other social media platforms—serves as a form of payment in addition to, or in lieu of, the commodity's legitimate price, which many of them avoid by viewing the film illicitly. The movie corporations thus profit not from their ownership of copyright, which they still hotly defend in current battles over intellectual property laws, but they also accumulate capital in the form of voluntary, even enthusiastic, online immaterial labor. That is, they benefit from the online activity of others just as Google's Page Rank algorithm does, according to Matteo Pasquinelli:

"Google is clearly a supporter of the *free* content produced by the *free* labor of the *free* multitudes of the internet: it needs that content for its voracious indexing" (original emphasis).[5]

The immaterial labor of online *Paranormal Activity* fans and would-be fans, then, constitutes a kind of hedge bet against the alledged losses to piracy that the industry decries in the war on piracy.

The first *Paranormal Activity* movie's trailers were also innovative in their active incorporation of audiences and digital technology into the publicity campaign. The ad mimics the film's low-budget visual aesthetic, with descriptive title cards setting the stage at a test screening in Hollywood, presenting both the movie and the trailer "as historical events" (Benson-Allott 170). The trailer dramatizes the experience of the audience, along with the characters in the film, producing a parallel narrative about one of the first groups to "experience" the movie. Then the lights go down, the night-vision camera engages, and we see the darkened theater, filled with spectators and shot from the back with a view of the screen, as well as from down in front, where we can see their faces reacting in horror as they watch the movie: mouths open, eyes covered, jumping involuntarily, screaming out loud. As Benson-Allott points out, through its use of similar technology to shoot the audience footage, "the ad's night-vision scenes ostensibly document real reactions, just as Peli's movie ostensibly documents real demonic possession," thus blurring the distinctions between the real theater audience and the fictional characters in the movie (188). By encouraging viewers *of the trailer* to place themselves in the position of the terrified viewers *of the movie* in that test screening, the trailer also re-inscribes the ordinariness that pervades the movie, as viewers see regular people in the trailer consuming the movie, which is purported about regular people.

The trailer also blurs the boundary between the product being sold (the movie) and the target buyers (the audience), as it places "viewers" both within the trailer and in the position of watching the trailer. The pro-filmic objects of the trailer are "viewers" like you, watching the movie, just as the characters in the movie are "really" Katie and Kristi. The *Paranormal Activity* trailer, as an artifact of brand culture, demonstrates the way in which the "separation between the authentic self and the commodity self not only is more blurred, but this blurring is more *expected and tolerated*"— and, I would add, enjoyed (Banet-Weiser 13, original emphasis).

Conclusion

Paranormal Activity and *Paranormal Activity 2* trace a family's troubled history with a demon across several generations, but the plots are always located within a family home and centered around a female character. The demon in the first two *Paranormal* films has come to claim a debt resulting from a contract with an ancestor, who has in a sense "mortgaged" future male offspring in exchange for power and wealth. Given the series' immediate context within the credit crisis and the Great Recession, we can interpret the demon as an allegory for debt under neoliberal capitalism: it is just as invisible, inescapable, and imperfectly apprehended via digital media. Like the video data that constitutes the "film" itself, and like the transnational finance capital and the intangible systems of consumer credit that permeate contemporary life, the demon is unseen and immaterial, yet it exercises enormous power.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes

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1. Raymond Williams coined this expression to describe emotions and perceptions common to a specific time and place and expressed in contemporaneous arts and other cultural forms. Steven Shaviro draws on this concept from Williams in his definition of post-cinematic affect. [[return to text](#)]
2. Thanks to Caetlin Benson-Allott for pointing this out.
3. I am currently co-editing, with Shane Denson, a collection of essays on this subject entitled *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st-Century Film*, which will be published as an open access e-book by REFRAME (<http://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/>). [[return to page 2](#)]
4. This Twitter account, like the franchise's official Facebook page, is still active and is now publicizing *Paranormal Activity 4* and upcoming productions. The original official website also still exists and publicizes the latest release, although currently doesn't allow IP addresses outside the United States to view the site.
5. Thanks to Shane Denson for pointing me to Pasquinelli here.

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Wolfen: they might be gods

by [Tyler Sage](#)

Part 1: visual essay



Detective Dewey Wilson (Albert Finney). He's a loose cannon, with unexplained trauma in his background. His commander explains laconically: "He had a lot of family problems. He started to drink a little too much."



The South Bronx, where much of the action takes place. It's a new U.S. wilderness.



A ruined church sits at the heart of the wilderness.



The old, the sick, and the homeless are the Wolfen's prey.



The wilderness as seen through the ...



... Wolfen's (lens-filtered) eyes.



A drug addict staggering through the ruins, about to be devoured. The presentation of the inner city as an almost pre-civilized wilderness populated by minorities is a recurring trope of 70s U.S. film.



The addict seen through the Wolfen's eyes ...



... as he's about to be killed.



Eddie Holt (Edward James Olmos) swinging the bullroarer on top of the bridge pier from the opening. He's a spiritual advisor with an insider's knowledge of the animalistic who can guide the detective hero.



The Wigwam bar, where the Native Americans hang out. Wilson goes into the bar and talks to Holt and a Native American woman who has no lines of dialogue and is apparently in the scene only to reinforce the earthiness of the place.



Of the Wolfen, Holt says, "The smartest ones, they went underground, into the new wilderness: your cities, into the great slum areas, the graveyard of your fucking species."



Close-up of a period photo of a Native American in the bar.



Holt drinks from a puddle and ...



... imitates a wolf in his confrontation with Wilson.



The film has a certain sense of humor. Here, Wilson reacts to a stuffed wolf in the biologist's office, when we've figured out what is going on but he hasn't.



Some of the humor is more macabre. In this scene, the police commander is decapitated and we see the eyes blink and lips move. Several scenes earlier, the coroner has delivered a semi-serious soliloquy on the way in which guillotined



Biologist Ferguson sadly watches film clips of wolves' amazing qualities and their destruction by humans. In a passionate outburst early in the film, he explains that the white people wiped out the wolves, Native Americans, and buffalo in what he

heads in the Middle Ages did just that.



In Ferguson's film clips, the wolves are shot from helicopters and held up as trophies by hunters. Horror fans, note the similarity of this shot to the opening of John Carpenter's 1982 classic *The Thing*. Unfortunately, Ferguson isn't the only one watching these clips.



A Wolfen has found him and sees this film clip through the window. In plot terms, this leads to Ferguson's demise. In thematic terms, it plays on the film's notions of the layerings of vision. The shot is of a human watching wolves killed on the screen, in turn watched by one of the super-wolves itself.

calls "the genocide express."



The movie plays with the notion of seeing. Here, a view of the church as seen through the scope of a rifle is contrasted...



... with a shot, from the point of view of a Wolfen, of the man looking at the church through the scope.



Later, we're given yet another shot of a man watching film clips. This time it's Wilson himself, watching aerial footage of the church.



Here, security officers introduce us to Eddie Holt by viewing his images on split screen.



The film continually contrasts these ideas of human seeing with the idea of Wolfen-vision. Here the Statue of Liberty is put in ironic context as a symbol of human freedom in a movie in which the only free things are the non-human Wolfen.



Another recurring motif is the fracturing and reflecting of images in the film. Here, in the first scene, the face of wife of the developer is cut apart by wind chimes. In a matter of moments, she will be devoured.



Later on, Wilson is similarly cut apart ...



... while regarding himself.



The approach of fractured framing is used for more than just close-ups. Here, Wilson and the coroner Whittington (Gregory Hines) investigate a body, seen upwards through a grate.

The police psychologist Rebecca Neff (Diane Verona) regards herself.



A Wolfen views the wilderness of the South Bronx through the frame of a window.

Here, holding a pistol and a cat, Neff is cut apart by shadows.



In the opening, we are given a similarly composed view.



The Wolfen's special vision comes through glowing eyes.



Once again, fracturing and reflection is used to set up the final confrontation in the developer's penthouse.



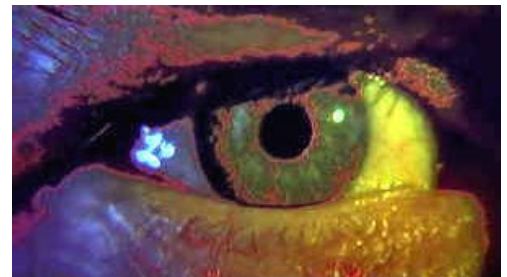
The final confrontation.



Crosscutting establishes ...



... the ultimate rapport between Wilson and the Wolfen.



Notice that the final shot ...



... of the Wolfen's eyes is seen with Wolfen-vision, implying that Wilson has come to see the world as they do. This is the culmination of his civilized-man's journey of purification into the heart of the wilderness.



Wilson smashing the developer's model, seen through the eyes of a Wolfen.



A tidy symbolic summation of the action: the ruins of the model under a wolf-skin rug.



The film closes with a series of fades. First, Wilson and Neff fade into a shot of Wolfen running through the city.



Then, we cut back to Eddie Holt on the tower of a bridge, swinging his bullroarer. This too fades into shots of the Wolfen.



Finally, the Wolfen gallop back to their inner-city wilderness and the film fades to black.

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Wolfen: they might be gods

Part 2: critical analysis

Michael Wadleigh's *Wolfen* (1981) begins with the murder of a New York City developer after the groundbreaking ceremony of an urban revitalization project. Point of view camera work, filtered lenses, and meaningful shots of the full moon (along with, of course, the title) lead us to suspect that the culprit is a werewolf. Police detective Dewey Wilson (Albert Finney) is assigned to the case. Believing that the murder might be the work of political radicals, the police department also assigns young, attractive psychologist Rebecca Neff (Diane Venora), who specializes in the pathology of violent revolutionaries.

From here, all the familiar narrative tropes spin forward:

- the detective and the psychologist discover a hard-edged and somewhat surly love for one another;
- a spiritual advisor (Edward James Olmos) is located who has an insider's knowledge of the animalistic and can guide the detective into his encounter with the mystical;
- a coroner (Gregory Hines) is stymied by the fact that the only evidence he can find is a single hair, apparently from a non-human source;
- a biologist identifies the hair, to the surprise of no one but the characters in the movie, as coming from one *Canis Lupis*.

We've seen this movie, many times. We will see it many times in the future (those of us who watch these sorts of things.) We understand how it unfolds. The wolf stalks humans and is stalked by the detective. Minor characters are devoured. The detective ends up victorious, yet also profoundly changed. The ending leaves open the possibility that this fearsome creature *may still be out there*.

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Wadleigh's only other major directorial effort was the documentary *Woodstock*, which attempted to capture something of both the joy and faint naïveté of that festival,[1][[open endnotes in new window](#)] and *Wolfen* has a

similar political orientation. At base, it's a cautionary horror film, one that wants to warn us of the dangers of human development as it trammels the natural world, and separates us from that world. It is not, however, an entirely simplistic presentation of environmentalist beliefs, and it is aware of the complexities involved in the idealization of nature. Additionally, it is a visually sophisticated film. It plays with the idea of perception by repeatedly breaking the frame with objects in the foreground. It also establishes a pattern of moving back and forth between the monster's vision (the colorized point of view shots established in the opening sequence) and human vision as filtered by various devices—televisions, closed circuit cameras, rifle scopes. Finally, it's a movie with an occasional sense of humor, both visually and in terms of its construction. All of which is to say that while it is not a great film and often not a very good one, it is neither stupid nor without its ambitions.

But inside its attempt at critique, or beneath it, lies something perhaps more interesting: a certain understanding—at points intentionally displayed, and at points unintentionally—of the social structuring and imagining of race in the United States. Much of the action takes place in a post-apocalyptic-looking South Bronx.[2] In the film's eye, this is not an inner city with a complex, poverty-ridden social structure, it is a ghetto presented as a nearly uninhabited desolation. Shots of bombed-out buildings and bleak streetscapes abound. Some of the action takes place in the almost medieval ruins of a church. Stray drug addicts stagger here and there through piles of fallen bricks like wanderers far from civilization.

It is through this wilderness that our monster stalks. And the notion of wilderness here is key: the werewolf, traditionally conceived, is a creature of the European forest or the Scottish moor. It is a creature that arises from a time when the wilderness was a threat, when to step outside of the palisades of one's village was to chance being torn to pieces by the natural forces lurking beyond human society. And yet the werewolf is at once both a thing of the wild and a human actor. Its basic terror does not come from its alien savagery, but from the comingling of that savagery with our human nature, from our fear that we might be contaminated by the wilderness outside the walls.

Much of the intended force of *Wolfen* arises from this tension between human and the wild being mapped onto the geography of the U.S. urban setting. Wilderness, the film implies visually, and states openly through dialogue, is no longer on the other side of the palisade. It is the inner city. Here is where the monsters now reside.

.....

The decay of New York City during 1970s and early 80s held a deep fascination for the (particularly white) U.S. movie-going public. In film after film, the city was portrayed as a kind of contemporary urban gladiator pit. Consider *Death Wish* (1974), in which an architect is driven to a kind of righteous homicidal madness by the incessant crime of the city; or *The Warriors* (1979), in which the entire city suffers from a seething undercurrent of gang violence; or *Escape From New York* (1981), in which the island of Manhattan has been turned into a maximum security prison from which there is no return. Even less campy films, such as *The French*

Connection (1971), *Serpico* (1973), *Mean Streets* (1973), and *Taxi Driver* (1976) played on this fascination.[3]

While this was often the general presentation of the city, the South Bronx and other traditionally African American neighborhoods seem to have had a particularly strong hold on the imagination of the time. And it is here that we move from a vision of the city as a whole as violently demented to a vision of the specific racial element of the degeneracy. In *Fort Apache, The Bronx* (1981), for example, white police officers in predominantly black neighborhoods feel like settlers in a savage "Indian county," as indicated by the allusive title.[4] The genre of "blaxploitation" films kicked off by *Shaft* (1971) featured black protagonists, and were originally marketed to black audiences, and yet soon came to be popular with white audiences due to their sensationalistic presentation of crime in the city as linked to black life.

This imagining of the poor African American neighborhood as the deepest heart of the wildest wilderness can be felt far beyond the boundaries of films set in New York. Thus the neat summation by the writers of *Apocalypse Now* (1976): we are told that the poor white sailor on the Naval Patrol Boat is from New Orleans, the blond kid is a surfer from California, and of the black kid we hear that "Mr. Clean came out of some South Bronx shithole, and I think the light and space of 'Nam put a zap on his head." Some thirty years later, in a review of a book on hip-hop, Dan Chiasson notes that, as a white kid growing up in Vermont, "If given the choice between traveling Transylvania to visit Dracula, or walking through the South Bronx, I would absolutely have chosen the former." [5]

.....

In *Wolfen* what gives this racial imagination a particular pungency is the presence of a third leg of triangulation: the Native American.[6] Here we have the character of Eddie Holt, played by Edward James Olmos, an AIM[7]-style activist who has given up his radical ways and found a proper job. He now works on a crew with other Native Americans, repairing the city's bridges. (The credit sequence of the film shows Holt and his partner atop one of the piers of the Brooklyn Bridge, the modern urbanity of the city spread before them, Holt rhythmically swinging a bullroarer.[8]) When Wilson's detective approaches Holt to ask whether he knows any political radicals who might have committed the film's initial murder, the subject of the animalistic arises, and a racially loaded argument ensues. Holt ends up taunting the detective by claiming that he can change shapes. Later we see him engaged in some sort of vaguely "Native American" ritual, in which Holt seems to believe he has transformed himself into a wolf. He snarls and leaps and goes on all fours to lap water out of a puddle.

Finally, after a traumatic encounter with the monster, Wilson goes to find Holt at an "Native American Bar." (I am not being sarcastic in my titling: this is a bar, named the "Wigwam,"[9] filled with Native Americans.) Here, our detective confronts Holt and learns the shocking truth of the movie: the killers are not werewolves at all.

The story told by the Native Americans of the bar is that, a long time ago,

before the arrival of the white man, the Native Americans and the wolves lived in harmony with nature. (As if to reinforce the deep truth of this, we are actually told it twice during the movie, the first time by the white biologist.) Then the white man came. He destroyed the Native American culture and decimated the wolves. Decimated them, that is, except for the most strongest and cunning: the Wolfen. These super-wolves survived the white onslaught, and continued to live, unbeknownst to us, in our urban wildernesses, preying on the sick (or the homeless and drug-addicted who populate the wilderness of the South Bronx), prowling the night and taking their living off of us. "In their eyes," says one of the wise old Native Americans, "YOU are the savages." Adds Eddie Holt, "They might be gods."

.....

One does not have to be particularly perceptive to see here much of the traditional U.S. fever-dream of race.

The South Bronx, with its black population, is the wilderness. It has fallen out of civilization, reverted to a forest filled with predatory wolves. It is scary, yes, but also pitiable—the blacks are poor and addicted to drugs. And what is the solution? Well, from white filmmaker to white audience the initial answer is clear: White largesse. A white police detective, a white biologist, a white psychologist, and the ultimately noble workings of the modern economic machine: the urban renewal project planned by the rich white guy killed in the first scene.

And the Native Americans? They are shamanistic, spiritual beings, closer to nature than we. Degraded, yes, but also admirable. And tragic figures, because of the destruction that was wreaked on them by us. This is an old portrayal, filled with guilt, piousness and false adoration. It began long before the original *Fort Apache* (1948), and has continued on in various shades through such exercises as *Dances With Wolves* (1990) and its sequel, *Avatar* (2009). As a habit of white thought in The United States, this is as deeply ingrained as it gets. As Richard Slotkin notes in his foundational book *Regeneration Through Violence*,^[11] to Puritan eyes the Native American was both a resident of Eden and a minion of Hell; he was wild in a way that bespoke a return to the original state, and yet was close to the horror of untamed nature in a way that could only be understood as demonic. This is a conflicted and deeply powerful response, and it seems clear that the intensity of emotion it generated led to the savagery with which the native population was treated for the four and a half centuries or so after the arrival of the Europeans.

This is also exactly the attitude that helped shape the reactions of Colonial America to the slave population, and has continued to help shape the relationship of white culture in The United States to black culture. From the familiar stock character of the "Magic Negro" (the black character who pops up in U.S. films to aid the white characters with his earthy wisdom^[12]), to cultural terror fantasies about the rape of white women by black men, to contemporary reactions towards the U.S. Presidency of Barack Obama, we can see the imprint of the Puritans' initial response to the racial other: fear and fascination. The fear *of* fascination, or of the possibility of being fascinated. The violence of the response. The masking of that violence through attempts

at paternalism, at pity, at separate but equal, [13] at guilt fraught with bitterness.

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Much has been written about this; much more still needs to be written. But there is a second question in play: What do these conceptions reveal about the vision and imaginings of the white United States at the time? One way of getting to this might be to ask: Who are the white characters in *Wolfen*?

We have the wealthy developer killed (along with his wife and bodyguard) in the first scene. In this character, we are given a tidy summation of the impotent and self-serving guilt of affluent whites towards urban poverty. He is first seen (through the eyes of a Wolfen) at the urban renewal groundbreaking, the spectacle of which is nearly parodic: white politicians in suits and ceremonial hard hats throwing lumps of dirt with golden shovels at the start of yet another round of "urban renewal." This is the type of project that, even by 1981, had acquired the feel of the quixotic—the deterioration of the inner city had been in full swing for two decades and there seemed to be no possibility of stopping it, despite the politicians' assurances that each new attempt would be the one to turn the tide. Later, after his murder, we are treated to a tour of his penthouse, complete with furniture so tacky it can only belong to someone very wealthy. The decor includes silver, reflecting, floor to ceiling blinds covering the panoramic NYC views, a model of the revitalization project in perfect, clean, white plaster (and, of course, a wolf-skin rug.) The developer was deeply distressed by the situation in the South Bronx; at the same time, he would never turn down the opportunity to make a couple of bucks off it.

A second white character we're given is the biologist named Ferguson (played by Tom Noonan) who identifies the mysterious wolf hair from the crime scene. Ferguson is the first person in the movie to explain to us that the wolves and Native Americans lived unencumbered lives and were, basically, very similar beings. He is a different archetype, the other side of the developer's coin: a nerdy scientist, living in a city and yet bemoaning the evils of technology and progress, consumed with adulation of the wild and of wolves. He is the stereotypical New Homesteader (people who move to the American West in order to find some kind of pastoral paradise they've convinced themselves must exist out there[14]),[\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) long before that phrase came into common use. Where the developer sees the progressive vision of (white) civilization overcoming the wilderness, Ferguson fetishizes the wild as something greater than himself, some repository of deeper meaning that is being tragically destroyed. In one scene we see him watching film clips of wolves and detailing the amazing abilities of the animal: "Jaw pressure: 1,500 pounds per square inch, pulverizing bones as big as baseball bats...Maximum speed forty miles per hour." If the developer gives us self-serving guilt, then Ferguson allows us a vision of sad, impotent guilt.

The film clips end, unavoidably, with footage of wolves being shot from helicopters and held up as trophies.[15] The message is clear: We are killing them. We! And, thus, only we can save them. This is guilt as empowerment. Guilt as a method of feeling good about ourselves: it's up to us (white culture) to go off and solve all the damn problems in the world. Again. (It is not a coincidence that the early framings of these habits of thought, by Slotkin and others, took place in the context of the Vietnam War; it is perhaps significant that they have not been more pronounced or visible during our current conflagrations.)

.....

The final white character worth pausing on is detective Dewey Wilson. He is, like all most good cop and horror-movie detectives of his era, a down-and-out, blue collar alcoholic, trying not all that hard to recover from some tragedy or another. He's dangerous. He's unpredictable. He's a loose cannon. And yes, he has, like they all do, that dead-eyed, desperate desire for something *more*; more spiritual, more real, closer to the bone. Something closer, perhaps, to that authentic *thing* that he once was, before he fell into the gutter and became aware of the world. And where will he find that thing? In a descent into the wild. A descent into the violent. A journey in which it becomes clear what he (and the audience) has been looking for all along: the heart of darkness, that totemistic move to the boundaries of civilization, the earthy, the deadly, the larger, deeper, darker (skinned) world. A journey taken, in this movie, into the new horror and wilderness of the inner city.

Seen from afar, is there not some tragic element in all of this? In the traps, the paradoxes, the desperation of the white consciousness? Perhaps pathetic? And yet terrifying in its consequences. What strange and unhappy people these must be, one is tempted to think, these characters and the audience that sees itself represented in them, whose fantasies seem to consist of denigrating and fearing exactly the thing that they yearn for. Who end up, through these deluded fantasies, these pathologies, wreaking havoc on the world.

.....

The comedian Chris Rock[16] had a bit he used to do about the group of people that have had it the worst in U.S. history: the Native Americans. African Americans, Rock explained, have suffered, while the Native Americans (Indians) have simply been annihilated. "I have seen a fucking polar bear riding a tricycle in my life," he proclaimed, "but I've never seen an Indian family just chilling out at Red Lobster." It was a joke that always got a great laugh, and it was a joke aimed at the white United States, one intended to remind us that the different races are not all equally responsible for the country's sins, and have borne them differently.

There have been moments in which mainstream white U.S. culture seems to have begun to think about grappling with its position and history. This grappling has not always been clearly articulated, and its expressions have not always been even noble or decent ones; they have usually pronounced themselves through fear, guilt, nightmares, and easy, frictionless morality plays. *Wolfen* is emblematic of this tradition, and of a particular historical

moment. The destruction forced onto the Native Americans, the issues of the history of slavery and Civil Rights, the validity of the melting-pot metaphor[17]: these were issues still on the public mind when the movie was made. There was at least some vague uneasiness on the part of white culture with the way in which it achieved its ascendancy. There was some awareness of what AIM was, some awareness of Peltier.[18] There was *Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee*. [19] There was the revisionist Western film, [20] there was a Black Panther Party, [21] Bob Dylan's "Hurricane," [22] the battles over the Bicentennial celebration. [23]

This cultural questioning is the source of the film's visual interest in fractured framing, mirroring, and questions of vision. From the first, we are presented with shots of the faces of the white characters broken up by objects in the foreground and oddly reflected in mirrors. We are also continually confronted with the question of how things are seen, from the many shots from the Wolfen's point of view, to a wide variety of shots in which the vision of (generally white) characters is filtered in a number of ways. This fracturing of the white personality and questioning of what it means to see the world through white eyes (particularly as opposed to the vision of the powerful and pure, but uncivilized, Wolfen) are issues the film is interested in exploring.

This ability of the dominant culture to question its position in a serious way has nearly vanished, despite all of our current talk about "white privilege." The moments of unease along these lines that still pop up occasionally in the United States tend to be so ingrained and exhausted that they've lost all meaning, or they fall prey to the culture of irony, which says that the most that can be done about anything is to mock it. The aforementioned *Avatar* is an example of the former. It's a lukewarm and sanctimonious parable about the treatment of the Native American, so morally vacuous and shot through with internal contradiction that it becomes little more than sentiment and nostalgia. Spielberg's *Lincoln* functions in the same vein: its basic view of the history of slavery as an evil which was purely and nobly overcome, rather than as a historical circumstance that in some way determined today's society. The approach to race on *South Park* [24] is an example of the opposite, ironic, pole. There the basic assumption is that we all know how terrible everything used to be and often still is, and the great thing now is that we can all laugh it.

The point here is not that white Americans should live in a state of constant guilt and remorse. The point is that perhaps the most tragic aspect of U.S. culture is its tendency to see itself as supreme and inevitable. We see this in current treatments of the issue of race, which assert that we have basically overcome the problem, which you would realize if you would just stop whining. "The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race," says our Chief Justice, "is to stop discriminating on the basis of race." [25] We see it in the U.S. vision of U.S. democracy as the necessary endpoint for civilization. We see it in the notion that our economic model provides us with nothing but *answers*. (Have a problem? Look for market solutions. Look for efficiency. Look for the power of statistics.) We see it in the bland confidence that U.S. culture has in its own power, its own rightness, its ability to solve any problem.

In the main, these are habits of historical white thought that have percolated through the national vision. That is, they are the habits of thought of the historical winner. They are the habits of thought of the people who have succeeded in the democracy, and been enriched by the economic system. They are the beliefs of the segment of the culture that has never been a minority. Ultimately, they are habits that reflect a deepening failure of the imagination: they preclude the notion that there are alternatives out there.

And as these habits of thought have become more and more and more widely accepted, we have seen a shifting in our conceptions of history: away from the idea that it might be necessary to deal with the implications of how we got to the position we now hold, and towards the idea that it's inevitable that the Native Americans and the minorities and the other historical losers will eventually come to see the benefits of joining our cultural dream.

.....

Here is the end of the movie: *Wolfen*: Wilson and Neff (the police psychologist), become trapped by the Wolfen in the penthouse apartment of the rich developer. (To ask how the Wolfen climbed — flew? — to this height would be to deny the film the absurd beauty of its vision.) Wilson has his gun drawn. They circle him and snarl. We have reached the moment when our protagonist is at last at the center of the heart of darkness. The film gives us a sequence that flashes back and forth between close-ups of Wilson's eyes and the eyes of one of the Wolfen. Their vision becomes united. Wilson lowers his gun and sets about destroying the model of the development project. He smashes it to lovingly filmed, slow-motion bits. In 1981, this is still a gesture that is possible. We white conquerors will try to stop our mad development and spare you natural creatures from destruction. And yet we cannot stop it, cannot stop the creation of penthouses and our development projects. We are caught in our own traps. We cannot be cleansed. We are being driven mad. The Wolfen understand. Wilson, in return, comes to understand the vast, ineradicable force of nature, and through that encounter he is cleansed. The fracturing of his personality is repaired by this encounter with the wild. The film ends with shots the Wolfen running through the streets of New York City. It is the system, the history, which is the problem; the wilderness, the natural spirit, can still be imagined as transcendent. (The fate of the black urban poor upon whom the Wolfen prey is unclear. There is only room here for so much awareness.)

It is a closing gesture of recrimination and impotence, of self-doubt; it is a gesture that both intentionally and unintentionally, as a self-conscious eco-drama and a mid-rate horror film, begins to wrestle with the tangled lines of the cultural imagination.

Is such a gesture possible now, in a country in which incarceration rates are six times higher for blacks than for whites, in which poverty rates for the Native American population are two and a half times higher than that of the white population, in which life expectancy correlates exactly with race? Perhaps it is. Perhaps the possibilities of recriminating imagination that produced *Wolfen* have not faded. Perhaps this is all alarmism, and films do not change, things are no worse (or better) than they were. We have our

Twelve Years A Slave, after all. Or perhaps our *Django Unchained*.

But, looking around at the cultural assumptions of our day, at the way the affluent white United States imposes its dreams on the world and then moves on from those dreams, keeping just ahead, letting everyone else trail behind, never thinking about those dreams, simply assuming its own inevitability, I'm reminded of another line from Chris Rock:

"Every town has the same two malls: the one white people go to and the one white people used to go to."

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Notes

1. (Throughout the essay, I've included footnotes on specific cultural elements of the United States for readers from other countries.) "Woodstock" was an outdoor music festival in the town of Woodstock, New York, in 1969. Attended by some 400,000 people, it became one of the epitomes of the 1960s counterculture "revolution" in the United States. [[return to page 1 of critical essay](#)]

2. New York City is made up of five boroughs, including Manhattan and the Bronx. Since the 1960s the South Bronx has been a mostly African American neighborhood, and has been beset by deep poverty, a situation which still exists. For a useful summation of the continuing discrepancy between neighborhoods in Manhattan (some of the world's wealthiest) and the neighborhood of the South Bronx, see Paul Harris, "Worlds Apart—The Neighbourhoods That Sum Up a Divided America" *The Guardian*, 17 Sept., 2011.

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/sep/18/bronx-manhattan-us-wealth-divide>

3. *The French Connection* is about unscrupulous New York cops chasing international drug smugglers; *Serpico* is about a police officer struggling to reveal corruption on his own force. Both are a part of a wave of "realist" U.S. films from the 1970s that reflected a deep cynicism about both civil authority and the traditional narratives of the U.S. pursuit of prosperity. *Mean Streets* and *Taxi Driver* explore this material from the side of the criminal rather than the cop; *Mean Streets* does this through a narrative of a small-time, aspiring gangster, *Taxi Driver* through the story of a man immersed in, and warped nearly out of recognition by, the violence of U.S. culture.

4. The title works in two ways. The first is through a direct reference to John Ford's *Fort Apache* (1948), which is the first of Ford's so-called "Calvary Trilogy." As with much of Ford's work, these films both participate in, and stand in uneasy relationship to, the myth of the U. West. They take as their subject military confrontations between the U.S. Calvary and the Native Americans in the period after the U.S. Civil War (1861-65). Each film in the trilogy engages with the myth and history of those confrontations, which involve the idea that the annihilation of the Native American was a necessary step in the worthy mission of bringing U.S. ideas of "freedom" and "civilization" into what was seen as an "untamed" land. This mythos is the source of the second, more subtle, reference of the title, which is to the U.S. habit of framing its military adventures in terms of "cowboys" and "Indians." The U.S. soldier abroad, from the Philippines to Vietnam to Iraq and

Afghanistan, has habitually been referred to as a cowboy, meaning one who brings civilization through violence, and the populations of those countries have been denoted Indians, that is, indigenous populations who will either be pacified or annihilated. The title *Fort Apache, The Bronx* transposes this entire military history onto the racialized policing situation (white cops, black populace) of New York City.

5. "'Rude Ludicrous Lucrative' Rap," *The New York Review of Books*, January 13, 2011.

<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2011/jan/13/rude-ludicrous-lucrative-rap/>

6. The Indigenous American population is often termed "Native American" or "Indian." To avoid confusion for readers outside of the United States, I've generally used "Native American" in this article.

7. AIM is the American Indian Movement. This is a group founded "to turn the attention of Indian people toward a renewal of spirituality which would impart the strength of resolve needed to reverse the ruinous policies of the United States, Canada, and other colonialist governments of Central and South America." In the early 1970s it was involved in a number of confrontations, sometimes violent, with the United States government. It is still an active advocacy group today. Quote taken from Laura Waterman Wittstock and Elaine J. Salinas, "A Brief History of the American Indian Movement," AIM website.

<http://www.aimovement.org/ggc/history.html>

8. A bullroarer is a traditional aboriginal instrument, made of a thin piece of resonating wood attached to the end of a length of string. When swung in circles, the wood vibrates, creating a roaring sound that can carry for great distances.

9. A wigwam is single-room, dome-shaped dwelling constructed by certain Native American tribes.

10. It is worth noting briefly that representations of this sort, in which black or minority inner cities are presented as wildernesses into which (usually white) characters must venture if they are to prove themselves, have not ceased to be made since the 1970s. Cop films from *Colors* (1988) to *Training Day* (2001) have used or explored this trope; nearly every decade sees several releases of white-teacher-ventures-into-the-minority-wilderness movies such as *The Principle* (1987), *Dangerous Minds* (1995), or *Freedom Writers* (2007); a host of other representations along these lines range from sophisticated interrogations of the subject matter such as HBO's famously seminal show *The Wire* (2002-08) to self-congratulations of white U.S. culture like 2009's *The Blind Side*.

11. *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of The American Frontier, 1600-1860*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1973.

12. Once again, this is a racialized tradition of U.S. storytelling that goes back

nearly as long as there have been U.S. stories. The black character Jim in Mark Twain's 1885 novel *Huckleberry Finn* is often cited as a seminal prototype; characters like Dick Hallorann in *The Shining* (1980) or Morpheus from *The Matrix* (1999) are paradigmatic filmic examples. The keys to the character are that he (or she) serves as a helpful adjunct to a white protagonist, and that he does so out of a mysterious reserve of wisdom, spirituality or actual magic; what is revealed by the character is not simply the subordinate nature of black characters to white, but the exoticization of those characters, an ascription to them (and thus to black culture in general) of wisdom in place of intelligence, earthiness in place of civilization, and magic in place of rationality.

13. From the end of the 19th Century until 1954, racial segregation in the United States was both legal and widely practiced. In much of the country, and particularly in the South, blacks and whites attended separate schools, had separate eating areas in restaurants, and were forced to use different public amenities, such as rest rooms. The term "separate but equal," used at the time to justify this policy, has since acquired an ironic charge, since the policy was a de facto means of social control, as the facilities provide for blacks were of course vastly inferior.

14. The term "New Homesteader" refers to the history of the westward expansion of the United States across the continent. This expansion was driven by government policies granting property rights to citizens who put a previously "unowned" piece of land under cultivation. The people who did this were called homesteaders. These policies served as an excuse for the extirpation of the Native Americans residing on the land; they also formed a central part of the national imagination, in which the western part of the continent was seen as a paradise waiting to be developed. [[return to page 2](#)]

15. This is a loaded image for U.S. environmentalists. The existence and eradication of the wolf has long been a contentious issue in the U.S. West. (The claim forwarded by people favoring the elimination of the wolves is that they pose a threat to livestock and even to people.) One focal point of this confrontation has been the intermittent policy of the state of Alaska to shoot wolves from helicopters.

16. Chris Rock is a black standup comic known for his acerbic, clear-eyed style and willingness to talk directly about issues of race and class in the United States.

17. There is a long-running struggle to arrive at a proper metaphor for the interaction of people of different races in the United States. "The melting pot" was an image of a country in which race was subsumed by national culture; under this view, people's racial identities (or the cultural identities of immigrants) would properly be melted away to some extent, and the resulting U.S. culture would be the result of this comingling. It was often contrasted with the metaphor of "the salad bowl" in which the ingredients of race and culture would mingle but retain their own essential shape and flavor.

18. Leonard Peltier is a member of AIM who was sentenced to serve consecutive life sentences (a particularity of the U.S. judicial system, meant to

signify the heinousness of his act) for the shooting of two FBI agents on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota in 1975. From the moment of his arrest, and continuing to this day, there have been deep suspicions about his guilt and the fairness of his trial.

19. *Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee*, by Dee Brown (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1970) is an influential history of the Native Americans in the second half of the 19th Century; the title refers to a massacre the Lakota Sioux people by U.S. soldiers in 1890. This is often seen as the final moment of the long war between the United States government and the Native Americans; it also took place on the same reservation where, eighty-five years later, the AIM movement and the FBI would be involved in the confrontation resulting in the conviction of Leonard Peltier.

20. A genre in which the tropes of the Western movie, and the myth of the United States inherent in that movie, is critiqued, reconsidered, or reformulated.

21. The Black Panther Party was an African American organization begun in the late 1960s that advocated for black pride and socialist revolution, and was often in confrontation with the U.S. government and the white establishment.

22. A song from Bob Dylan's 1976 album *Desire*, about the 1966 arrest and conviction for murder of Ruben Carter, an African American boxer who served nineteen years in prison before his conviction was overturned.

23. The 1976 celebration of the bicentennial of the U.S. declaration of independence from England was marked by a great deal of controversy. Many people of color felt that in the anniversary's celebration of U.S. virtues, the nation's history of genocide and slavery, as well as its continuing tradition of structural racism and poverty, were being whitewashed.

24. *South Park* is an enormously influential cartoon sitcom that first aired in 1997. Its protagonists are a group of kids in rural Colorado, and its approach is to satirize subjects important to all shades of the political and religious spectrums, while maintaining enough sentimentality to prevent its worldview from ever quite being absurdist or nihilistic.

25. This is a line penned by John Roberts, the deeply conservative Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States. It comes from one of a series of cases in which the conservatives on the court have made it increasingly difficult for public institutions to take race into consideration when making decisions that affect social policy. Robert's claim is that the government's attempts to remedy the effects of slavery by taking into account the race of citizens (he terms this "discrimination" to slant the argument) are inherently racist.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

“As beautiful as a butterfly”? Monstrous cockroach nature and the horror film

By [Joseph Heumann](#) and [Robin Murray](#)



Positive cockroach images



Cockroach villain in *Men in Black*.



Starship Troopers Bad Bugs: Do your part to stamp them out!

A key scene in the middle of Guillermo del Toro’s 1993 horror debut, *Cronos*, typifies how fiction film uses conflicting views of insects. Attesting to insects’ power, dying industrialist de la Guardia (Claudio Brook) says a coveted device prolongs life because a cockroach trapped inside it functions like a “living filter.” He asks the film’s hero, Jesus Gris (Federico Luppi), who has activated the mechanism for himself, “Who says insects aren’t God’s favorite creatures?” They have survived from almost earth’s beginnings while other species have disappeared. More to the point, de la Guardia suggests that insects may have qualities that transform them from vile creatures into gods, declaring, “Christ walked on water—just like a mosquito.”

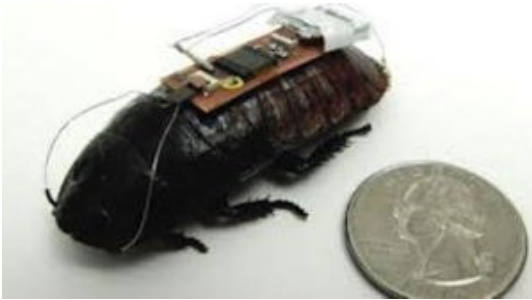
Animal studies scholar Marion W. Copeland provides a context for this kind of reaction in her essay, “Voices of the Least Loved: Cockroaches in the Contemporary American Novel,” in *Insect Poetics*, asserting, “The symbolic value of the cockroach to marginal literatures comes from the insect’s reputation as both survivor and victim” (155), characteristics that anthropomorphize the cockroach and imply both positive and negative perspectives on humanity. The suggestion that the cockroach will outlast all other life forms, including humans, permeates popular film, including positive appearances as the only friend of the hero in *WALL-E* (2008) and negative portrayals as villain in *Men in Black* (1997) and *Starship Troopers* (1997).[1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]

In the horror genre, such a symbolic value also sometimes leads to explorations of how we may transform cockroaches into both monsters and saviors when humanity intervenes “scientifically,” either deliberately or by accident. Copeland and evolutionary biologist Marc Bekoff assert a usefulness to anthropomorphizing, and entomological consultant James W. Mertins declares that “almost all of the well-treated movie arthropods are at least somewhat anthropomorphized.” But in the cockroach *horror* film, as Stephen R. Kellert points out, representations of the cockroach highlight its characteristics so as to promote fear in humans while also drawing on traits we share with these insects in our most horrific versions of ourselves.

A definition of “anthropomorphism” put forward by computer scientists Per Persson, Jarmo Laaksolahti, and Peter Lonnquist indicates how we



Eating cockroaches on a reality show.



Cockroaches as electronic tools.



Cockroach adapt to become glucose-averse.



The first set of insect monsters in *Damnation Alley* (1975) are giant blue scorpions that surround a compound where ex-military personnel now live.

might make these horrific connections. For Per Persson, et al, anthropomorphism serves as “a way of simplifying and thereby making sense of the environment by projecting a host of expectations about human life onto aspects of that environment.” They say we do this by referring to differing phenomena and schools of thought—primitive psychology, folk-psychology, traits, social roles, and emotional anthropomorphism. Anthropomorphized traits of the cockroach, then, underpin the narratives of cockroach horror films whether or not the films present cockroaches as survivors or victims, or as benefactors to humanity or destructive forces of nature.

When Gregor Samsa awoke to discover he had turned into a cockroach in *Metamorphosis*, Franz Kafka’s brilliant literary creation forever crystallized humankind’s eternal fear of and disgust with the common household insect. In the horror films *Bug* (1975), *Damnation Alley* (1977), *The Nest* (1988), *Cronos*, and *Mimic* (1997), however, their “villainy” is a product of transformation that differs from that described in *Metamorphosis*. In these horror films, such changes connect with themes about ecology, either through the films’ depicting experimental genetic alterations or chemical or nuclear environmental disasters. *Mimic* and *Bug*, for example, examine the destructive repercussions of genetic engineering originally meant to alter cockroaches for human benefit, and these representations even move beyond historian William M. Tsutsu’s suggestion that “these cinematic big bugs [represent] ambivalence about science and technocratic authority, and repressed Freudian impulses” (1). *Cronos* takes these points about a changed environment further, emphasizing insects’ symbolic survival value. In addition, the film explores the implications of humanity’s drive for immortality by transforming its hero into an insect not unlike the cockroach that was the source of his change. Despite this seemingly positive association, however, *Cronos* also projects a negative view of the cockroach and all it represents. In this regard, it is like most films about insects. As Mertins asserts, “arthropod features rarely project positive images of arthropods, entomologists, or science” (86).

Typically, then, altered and enhanced roaches are presented as horrific monsters that must be destroyed, perhaps because they too closely resemble the monstrous side of humanity. *Damnation Alley* illustrates how cockroaches might transform into killers after a nuclear holocaust, and *The Nest* explores the possible disastrous consequences of a biological experiment that turns roaches into flesh-eating fiends. *Mimic* and *Bug*, on the other hand, examine the destructive repercussions of genetic engineering meant to alter cockroaches for human benefit. *Mimic* explores the long-term effects after entomologist Susan Tyler (Mira Sorvino) creates a mutant breed of cockroach, the Judas Breed, to offset an epidemic spread by the common cockroach. *Bug* also examines the ramifications of developing a new breed of cockroach, in this case showing the roaches’ growth both in intelligence and destructive force. *Cronos* more explicitly highlights the symbolic value of the cockroach as a seemingly immortal survivor. All these films, however, demonstrate a similar perspective on the cockroach, suggesting that manipulating nature, even for beneficial results, ultimately leads to destructive ends.

Damnation Alley and *The Nest*:



To emphasize their monstrous nature, roaches in *Damnation Alley* attack Keegan (Paul Winfield), who is overwhelmed and killed in seconds.

classic cockroach horror

Based on a novel by science fiction writer Roger Zelazny, *Damnation Alley* shows us Earth after a Third World War. The planet is tilted off its axis, covered in radioactive dust, and surrounded by bizarre red clouds and spasmodic flames. Like the iconic Big Bug movie *Them* (1954), one of Earth's new realities is monstrously transformed insect life. Also, according to the film's narrator, the climate has gone insane. Once the radiation settles down, the few humans that remain must struggle for survival and dominance, a struggle nearly thwarted by the monstrous insects created by the nuclear war. And the most horrific of these monstrous insects is the cockroach. Such a plot setup is sure to set off a predictable response in viewers. As interdisciplinary scholar Eric C. Brown explains in his introduction to *Insect Poetics*,

“Cockroaches routinely outrank other animals as the most repulsive species, and reality television shows like *Survivor* and *Fear Factor* exploit disgust at protein-laden arthropods to draw ratings” (x).

Setting up the plot, the first set of insect monsters in the film, giant blue scorpions, surround a compound where ex-military personnel now live. The scorpions attempt to attack a motorcycle rider, Tanner (Jan-Michael Vincent), who is returning from town with a stuffed life-size female doll. His roommate, Keegan (Paul Winfield) first believes Tanner has sacrificed a woman to the scorpions, but when he looks through his binoculars, he realizes it is a department store mannequin. In this post-apocalyptic setting, the mannequin rather than the giant blue scorpions attract Keegan's attention.

Such a comic scene in some ways separates *Damnation Alley* from earlier insect horror films that had primarily serious tones. In an essay suggesting that those big bug movies were responding to “growing misgivings about the safety and effectiveness of modern insecticides,” historian William M. Tsutsui demonstrates this separation. According to Tsutsui,

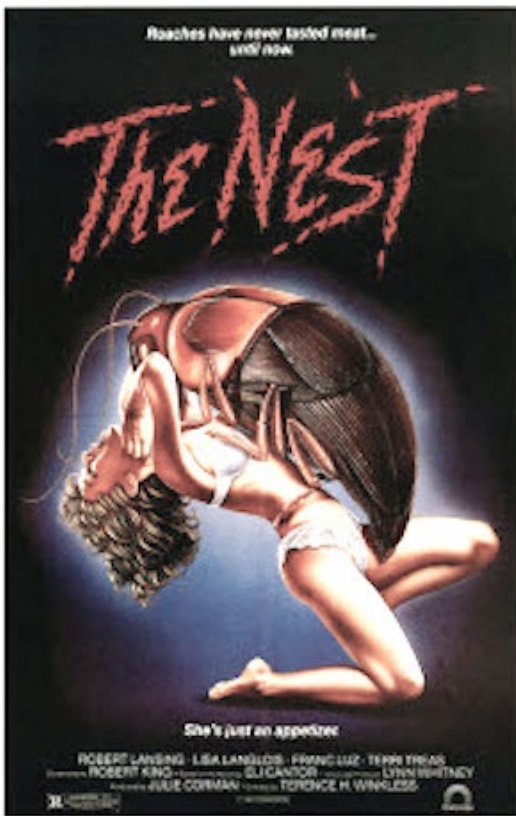
“Critics and historians have invariably interpreted these cinematic big bugs as symbolic manifestations of Cold War era anxieties, including nuclear fear, concern over communist infiltration, ambivalence about science and technocratic authority, and repressed Freudian impulses” (1).

Damnation Alley takes a more comic approach to the big bug movie. Yet, here too giant scorpions are portrayed as monsters that must be avoided and destroyed, even though humanity's addiction to war produced them.

A second set of insect monsters show up later in the film, after the military compound near Tanner and Keegan's refuge explodes when a cigarette ignites a gas leak. Only two of the officers housed there survive—Major Eugene Denton (George Peppard) and Lt. Tom Perry (Kip Niven). The new insect monsters emerge in Salt Lake City, Utah, where the group encounters large formations of killer cockroaches while collecting supplies. The first evidence of the roaches appears when they find a human skeleton picked completely clean by radioactive cockroaches emerging from the sewers. The film emphasizes their monstrous nature by having the roaches

attack Keegan, who is overwhelmed and killed in seconds. Tanner and Janice also encounter hordes of cockroaches in a department store, but they escape on their motorcycle. "The whole town is infested with killer cockroaches," Tanner exclaims and then we see human skeletal remains throughout the town.

The film depicts cockroaches as monsters throughout these battles within the community with little attempt to anthropomorphize them. As the survivors head toward the hope of sanctuary in Albany, New York, insects are a monstrous enemy defying all natural laws. Radiation was the culprit causing changes in insect life, alterations that don't appear in any other species in the film. Ultimately Tanner, Janice, and Denton successfully combat all the insect monsters they encounter and find fellowship in Albany with what we presume are the only remaining humans in the United States. The transformed cockroaches presumably live on as monstrous nature that must be eradicated or avoided.



The Nest (1988) complicates construction of the cockroach by connecting their monstrous quality to a mad scientist figure.

At least in Western culture, cockroaches continue to promote fear and aversion in humans. In Hollywood films, insects—cockroaches in particular—embody characteristics that promote fear in humans, but those traits may also implicitly refer to aspects of humanity. For example, insects are “often associated with notions of mindlessness and an absence of feeling,” thus setting up a potential imaginary link between insects and madness. And they also possess a radical “autonomy... from human will and control” (Kellert 58), a disposition associated with humans who resist subjugation. Finally, according to Kellert, their incredible fecundity seems to generate the most fear in humans. In *Damnation Alley*, for example, such fecundity turns monstrous when it contrasts so vigorously with humanity’s self-destruction.

The Nest (1988) complicates horror film imagery by connecting the cockroach’s monstrous aspects to a mad scientist figure. With its focus on the connection between science and corporations, *The Nest*’s plot may copy that of the more famous *Alien* (1979). As in the *Alien* films, a conflict between humans and monsters they have created is resolved once a queen and her brood are discovered and destroyed. This time, though, the “nest” is deep in a cave outside an idyllic California coastal town. The plot then warns against genetic modifications of cockroaches, a transformation that turns bugs into horrifically anthropomorphized monsters. Negative associations with the insects grow as they take center stage from the film’s opening until its closing denouement. Entomologist Edward O. Wilson’s foreword to *Cockroaches: Ecology, Behavior, and Natural History* illustrates well a kind of revulsion and aversion that this film illustrates:

“Most of us, even the entomologists in whose ranks I belong, have a stereotype of revolting creatures that scatter from leftover food when you turn on the kitchen light and instantly disappear into inaccessible crevices. These particular cockroaches are a *problem*, and the only solution is *blatticide*, with spray, poison, or trap.” (Bell, et al ix)

The cockroaches in *The Nest* are first established as pests that must be eradicated but then transform into monsters that may ultimately destroy humanity instead. They are, as Eric C. Brown claims, “humanity’s Other” (xi). It is worth describing the plot in some detail to see how science is shown to create the horror.

The Nest opens in a small harbor town of North Port where Sheriff Richard Tarbell’s (Franc Luz) switchboard officer has been getting strange calls about missing animals, calls that are immediately connected to insects when Tarbell finds a cockroach in his coffee at a diner counter. The sense of a widespread presence of cockroaches is also reinforced when the librarian reveals that something—mice or insects—has eaten all of the bindings out of her library books. The central cockroach drama, however, intertwines with a subplot, a love triangle Tarbell creates between himself and two women, the diner’s owner Lillian (Nancy Morgan) and his previous girlfriend Elizabeth (Lisa Langlois). The re-igniting of Tarbell and Elizabeth’s romance leads to a clue about the insect problem. When Elizabeth takes a walk toward the hideout of their youth, she finds a “no trespassing” sign from “Intec Development.” A German shepherd’s cries of agony stop her; when she reaches the dog, she finds his flesh eaten down to

the bone. Tarbell retrieves something that looks like insect droppings off of the dog, yet village Mayor Elias (Robert Lansing) urges Tarbell to hold off on searching the Intec property for more evidence. He claims Intec is building condominiums and will bring revenue to the island.

The Nest constructs scientists as monsters when Intec sends an entomologist, Dr. Morgan Hubbard (Terri Treas), to the island to examine the devoured dog. Dr. Morgan serves as a typical representative of the inhuman, perhaps “mad” scientist seen in most classic monster movies. Instead of experiencing the fear felt by the rest of the community, Dr. Hubbard seems enamored by the roaches and explicitly anthropomorphizes them. For example, when the cockroaches attack a trapped cat, she exclaims, “very brave, very strange creatures,” since few predators can threaten the cockroach.

Dr. Hubbard’s reactions to the insects reinforce studies of cockroaches that highlight their physical and intellectual strengths. Such studies also make explicit connections between cockroaches and humans. According to Copeland, for example, “as in humans, female cockroaches have stronger immune responses than males and the very young and very old have weaker responses than mature adults” (131). As early as 1912, studies at Summer Teacher’s College in St. Louis showed that cockroaches could learn to “overcome their innate aversion to light” (135). They were also found capable of running a maze, even without their heads (135). In *The Nest*, then, cockroaches join forces to trap and defeat a cat.

The film reveals that because they have been genetically modified in an Intec lab, the roaches have also developed new powers, more concretely illustrating the human and god-like qualities associated with them. The females now can reproduce without the contributions of their male counterparts, for example. Because she has produced these females, Dr. Hubbard embraces these new superior but deadly qualities, naming them nymph cockroaches. She lauds their abilities, but when she puts her gloved hand near them in a large lab container, they quickly bite it, highlighting their move from human prey to predator. As a “mad” scientist, however, Hubbard seems sexually excited by the mangling of her hand, refusing to remove it until Elias pulls it out. Despite these warning signs, Dr. Hubbard tells Elias she can control the roaches and asks for twenty-four hours to solve the problem.

Elizabeth’s examination of Elias’s papers begins to reveal the truth about these cockroaches’ genetic alterations. Instead of condominiums, Intec has built a research facility where, according to Hubbard, her experiments are benevolent rather than destructive and meant to create cockroaches that will destroy all other roaches and then die without reproducing. However, the cockroaches have grown so powerful that even a lethal pesticide can’t destroy them. A solution arises when the main characters realize the roaches have become social animals and must have a nest and a queen to guide them.

The final dark scenes of the movie emphasize a possible solution to rebalance the horror of this now monstrous nature. As Elizabeth explains, if they destroy the caves, they will destroy the nest, suggesting that if they destroy the horror’s setting, the monstrous insect horror will also disappear. The roaches all go toward the queen in the caves like “a collective unconscious,” the film thus making an overt connection to an anthropomorphized cockroach mythology. In the cave where the nest is hidden, Dr. Hubbard is destroyed by a roach figure constructed of multiple

human skeletons. Tarbell and Elizabeth escape the cave before it explodes, and the two kiss. In *The Nest*, both science and the cockroach become monstrous, but since only the bugs and the mad scientist die, perhaps the plot implies we need only destroy our worst selves.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Bug and Mimic: transforming cockroaches for human good



Bug (1975)—the mad scientist.

Although both *Bug* and *Mimic* anthropomorphize roaches and other insects, neither the insects nor the scientists that transform them are well treated. Based on the novel, *The Hephæstus Plague*, William Castle's final film, *Bug*, highlights what happens when a scientist tampers with nature. Roaches that belch flames remain vulnerable and easily destroyed until entomologist James Parmiter (Bradford Dillman) attempts to mate them with other roaches. The roaches then become more like humans as they gain intelligence; they grow deadly when they breed, producing carnivorous offspring. Eventually, these offspring also mate and kill, creating flying burning insects that drag Parmiter and the science he represents to hell.

Despite the heightened anthropomorphism, then, in *Bug*, both cockroach and scientist are constructed as monstrous. Although the film's scientist Parmiter is a biology professor who explains many things, he is also—as entomologist Mertins remarks about the scientist image—"shown ... as detached from reality," a "psychotic" (86). Parmiter begins as a great teacher who tells his students, "Earth, soil, wind, temperature are all part of an exact pattern." When he instructs his students about a Florida beetle that scalds its enemy, however, the film's focus on a rare roach species is broached. And when a farm boy shows him a dead cat, burned by the flaming cockroaches, the teacher is intrigued, so much so that he makes the roach his life work—even after the roaches kill his wife by crawling into her hair and lighting her up like a human torch.



Monstrous cockroaches ignite hair in *Bug*.

Aided by the insect photography of Ken Middleham, who also filmed the documentary *The Hellstrom Chronicle* (1971) and the science fiction thriller *Phase IV* (1974), *Bug* provides an authentic portrayal of the cockroaches, at least until breeding ignites their intelligence to such an extent that they can read and write. The prehistoric roaches that appear after an earthquake, for example, produce sparks not unlike the bioluminescence of the South American cockroach, called "pronatal headlights" in Bell et al's *Cockroaches*. As Bill Gibron of *PopMatters* declares, close-up shots of the film's roach mandibles also "make their actions seem almost plausible."



Cockroaches in *Bug* prove fatal.



Hellstrom Chronicle connects humans with insects and merges documentary and horror.



Phase IV also connects humans with insects, primarily in terms of their intelligence.



Bug's cockroaches look tame but breath fire.



Cockroaches ignite fires in *Bug*.



In *Bug* cockroaches emerge from and return to a crevice that seems to lead to hell.



In *Bug* cockroaches evolve quickly, learning to fly, write, and drag their creator to hell.

The monstrous nature of these roaches is shown in a variety of scenes before Parmiter decides to breed a new species. His friend Mark's (Alan Fudge) wife Sylvia (Patty McCormack) is killed by a roach attack, for example, and a roach also climbs in another woman's ear (Jamie Smith Jackson) and destroys her. Although we do not see her killed on screen, Parmiter's wife Carrie's (Joanna Miles) death is gruesome. But as Mark explains, these new roaches live very short lives and cannot reproduce, at least without intervention, so the danger associated with them should be finite.

The horror becomes amplified when Parmiter further anthropomorphizes the roaches by facilitating their reproduction. In a dark and deserted farmhouse setting, the now reclusive Parmiter breeds this new species of roach with what looks like an U.S. cockroach specimen in a process that will transform a dying species into a menace. Later, when Parmiter sees the roaches write "We Live" on the wall with their bodies, he knows he has created unbeatable human-like monsters and is helpless against their assault. After their flames engulf him, we see him burning. But in an odd twist that emphasizes the parallels between the roaches and their creator Parmiter, the offspring of the original breed drag him into the crevice left by a second earthquake. The fissure's bottom looks like the bowels of hell, with fire and brimstone deep below, and the earth explodes and covers them, closing off the opening.

This sudden ending turns horror into camp, but it also demonstrates negative associations with both science and anthropomorphized insects found in most bug features. It also serves as a not too subtle moral attack on science and the cockroach monsters science could create. As Bill Gibron states, "Naturally, whenever you wander onto God's domain, things get out of hand and more people die. And it takes an unexplainable divine intervention (a second earthquake and a noble individual sacrifice) to end the debacle."



In *Mimic* the mad scientist is also a healer.

As in *The Nest*, *Mimic* illustrates some of the negative repercussions of genetic engineering, even with good intentions. To eradicate a deadly disease spread by roaches, entomologist Dr. Susan Tyler (Miro Sorvino) creates the Judas Breed, a roach hybrid designed to kill the common U.S. cockroaches carrying the virus. What fails in Tyler's design, however, is the genetic change meant to kill off this new strain. Although Tyler has constructed this new species without the ability to reproduce, they mutate over a three-year period and not only multiply but also grow to an enormous size, allowing them to mimic their human prey in an explicit act of anthropomorphism.



Mimic's cockroach horror is a combination of insects that evolves quickly to mimic its predator and prey—the human.



The cockroach human mimic in the film breeds quickly.



A mimic exoskeleton demonstrates the horror inadvertently created.



Dissecting the smaller mimic reveals its evolutionary journey.

The plot draws on mythology to reveal the cockroaches as monsters early in the film when they are connected with the deaths of hundreds of children in New York City. An opening shot of pinned cockroaches matches photos of deceased children, also pinned like insects. Close-ups of the eyes and other body parts of departed children then amplify this connection. We learn the death toll has reached 1000, and the Center for Disease Control has been unable to halt the epidemic of “Strickler’s Disease” until Tyler creates the Judas Breed.

Despite their benefits to the city’s young population, the Judas Breed’s impact on the biotic community remains unclear. Three years after the breed’s creation, the disease has been eradicated, but evidence that the new breed has become monstrous begins to appear. We see a man running from something and falling to his death from a painting scaffold while an autistic boy, Chuy (Alexander Goodwin), watches from his window and recites names of different kinds of shoes. Chuy provides the first indication that the predator is the Judas Breed when he makes the sound of an insect with his two spoons and exclaims, “Funny, funny shoes.” When Tyler receives an intermediate sized specimen, she begins to realize that her genetic experiment has failed. Instead of dying off, the Judas breed has evolved, growing into a predator. The Judas Breed has found a way to reproduce despite genetic engineering and has become a threat to the city instead of its savior.

Tyler’s role as a “mad scientist” is complicated in *Mimic*, however, when she and her partner Peter (Jeremy Northam) decide to “undo” the monstrous genetic mistake she has produced. With help from Chuy’s father (Giancarlo Giannini), Tyler, and a subway cop (Charles S. Dutton), they bring tension to the conflict between human and nonhuman nature. After a long and suspenseful battle with the Judas Breed “Mimics” in the subway tunnels, an abandoned ornate station, and antique train car, Tyler escapes with Chuy, and Peter destroys the Mimics’ nest by lighting gas in the subway tunnels and escaping through a waterway beneath it. Tyler destroys the remaining male Judas breed by leading him to a train that crushes him, and Peter walks out of a tunnel, reuniting the family, with Chuy added to it. Brute force, not genetic manipulation, seemingly destroys the Judas Breed.



The mimic’s humanlike stance.



A mad scientist seeks to rectify the horror she created.

Despite its initial traditionally negative construction of both scientists and the mutant bugs they create, the film concludes with a more sympathetic portrayal of entomology and a more nuanced critique of humanity's exploitation of the natural world. *Mimic* draws on Copeland's more positive approach to the insect, highlighting how metaphors surrounding the cockroach draw on anthropomorphic tendencies. As Copeland suggests, the film demonstrates how associations of the cockroach with chthonic elements affect their literary and filmic reputation. According to Copeland, literary works are "rooted in world traditions that draw on the cockroach's tendency to prefer dark and hidden places, both linked in the modern mind to the chthonic, the early powers associated with the feminine as well as with eroticism and fertility" ("Voices of the Least Loved" 155). *Mimic* illustrates these roots.

Although, as Janet Maslin states in her *New York Times* review, the film "exploits a dual fascination with morbidity and rogue science," this traditional horror film, drawn from predecessors such as *The Relic* and *Alien*, also gains force under the direction of Guillermo del Toro, who infuses a stale plot with stylistic elements that emphasize the disastrous environmental consequences of such genetic alterations. As Roger Ebert suggests, for example, del Toro creates "tactical suspense" with Chuy's clicking spoons. Del Toro also constructs both the Judas breed and its habitat with an eye toward Gothic horror and suspense.



Cockroaches share multiple human traits.



The microchips attached to cockroaches may solve multiple problems in dark corners.



Connecting God with the seemingly immortal cockroach.



The mythology of the cockroach permeates popular culture.

The Judas Breed, too, moves beyond the typical horror monster with help from both del Toro and production designer Carol Spier. According to Maslin, "the bugs move with scary agility, and the sounds are highly evocative, even if histrionic music too often suggests that the Phantom of the Opera may be in the wings." Shots of the breed mimicking humans also transform a commonplace horror into a fresh Gothic film. Because the breed is a mutant insect, however, a mixture of termite and mantis, its monstrous qualities also draw on the cockroach's strengths and stereotypes. Ultimately the Judas Breed must be destroyed, and entomologist Tyler must correct the deadly mistake she made despite its initial benefits. With these qualities in mind, the film demonstrates well—with both narrative and aesthetic elements—that manipulation of the natural world may have dangerous repercussions.

Cronos and humanity's search for immortality

Although it too argues against manipulating nature and transforming insects, *Cronos* draws on the more positive aspects of the cockroach mythology and anthropomorphism, stressing the roach's ability to survive as a way to explore thematically humanity's urge to live forever. The film broaches positive associations with cockroaches that Copeland notes in her book *Cockroach*. Because "of its predilection for the dark" (81), Copeland suggests, the cockroach has become associated with "the unconscious and the power of the id" (81), an image *Cronos* explores. Told from the perspective of a revisionist vampire, Jesus Gris (Federico Luppi) and his not-so-innocent granddaughter, Aurora (Tamara Shanath), the film normalizes the urge for immortality, as well as the power of an id bent on self-satisfaction.



The opening of the film *Cronos* shows the device's first vampire owner.

When Jesus unwittingly reactivates a cockroach-shaped gold device, he also highlights positive associations with the insect. Golden cockroaches in the Mexican tradition are associated with fertility and rebirth. As literary scholar Christopher Hollingsworth suggests, "To Mexicans, the cockroach is more than a pest. Celebrated in folklore and song, this durable creature is associated with survival and successful opposition to oppression" (273). In the film, we find out that this device was built by a 16th century alchemist, Uberto Fulcanelli (Mario Iván Martínez), who craved eternal life.



Jesus and his granddaughter Aurora admire the cronos device.

When the device reappears in Jesus' antique shop more than 400 years later, it prompts the primary struggles of the film, as well. Jesus must overcome inner conflicts between life and death, and between the human and monstrous forces driving his actions. He must also battle a dying corporate magnate, De la Guardia (Claudio Brook) and his American nephew Angel (Ron Perlman), who will do anything to get the device. To resolve these conflicts, however, the film draws on the same ideology as other cockroach horror films. Because the *Cronos* device exploits the mythologized sense of permanence associated with the cockroach to transform a mortal human into an enduring insect-like vampire, the user defies the natural order, which can only lead to failure, death, and devastation.

Cronos illustrates and explains the device's source in an opening scene that introduces the film's first conflict, that between life and death. An alchemist seeking eternal life creates the device in 1536. He is a mad scientist transforming himself into a vampire who lives until 1937, when the device is re-discovered. Brad O'Brien thus suggests, "although Fulcanelli is a vampire, first he is a mad scientist playing God, a postmodern version of Prometheus, a late twentieth-century take on Frankenstein.... Del Toro has combined the myths of Dracula and Frankenstein in order to form his own creation myth" (173). In its plot however, the film concentrates more fully on the drive for eternal life associated with both the insect that operates the device and the vampire that Jesus becomes.



The powerful de la Guardia contemplates his own mortality.

This exploration of immortality as both a blessing and a curse is presented in two contrasting settings that emphasize these and other dualities: the Gris home and antique shop vs. the de la Guardia industrial complex and residence. As Roger Ebert declares, "This is the stuff of classic horror films, and *Cronos* ... combines it with a colorful Latin magic realism." And Desson Howe of the *Washington Post* calls the film "an enormously enjoyable gothic yarn from Mexico [that] transfuses the genre with wry grotesquerie, but retains respect for the old classic films." The light and color choices made by del Toro accentuate this respect for the classic horror film, while also drawing on elements of both the gothic horror of literature and a sense of alienation created by the modern industrial world.



Jesus seems destined to become a vampire like Dracula.

The contrast between the color palates in these two settings amplifies the conflicts that Jesus confronts. Although the sixteenth-century past of the alchemist is shot in sepias with smooth light that provides a neutral view of this world, the world of the Grises is warm and inviting despite, as del Toro explains in his notes, “a stylistic connection between the alchemist and Jesus” attached to shots of the interior of the device. According to del Toro, in the Gris home and antique shop there should be “no cold tones” and “blues, grays, purples, etc.” should be avoided. The cinematography, del Toro explains, “should be filtering toward an almost golden light.” This use of warm colors connects both the home and antique shop with life rather than death, and good rather than evil, complicating traditional views of the vampire—once the device transforms Jesus, endowing him with youthful drives and eternal life. Del Toro accentuates this warmth with soft and fluffy textures as well, from puffy pillows to the comfy towel Aurora offers Jesus when he returns home after Angel attempts to murder him.

Angel provides the catalyst for Jesus’s transformation, as well as the multiple conflicts of the film. He first shows the placement of both the Cronos device and the roaches that “operate” it inside an archangel statue with a missing eye. Shaped like a cockroach, the Cronos device is gold; it is a golden cockroach like the fertility symbol of Mexican folklore. According to Copeland, golden cockroaches in the Mexican tradition were associated with “the golden maize used in their ritual observance of the sun’s power over the biotic community. They had revered the roaches as one of the chthonic powers” (157).



The warmth of Jesus Gris’s shop highlights his own emotional warmth.



The blues of the de la Guardia factory illustrate the coldness of setting and owner.



Jesus and Aurora’s relationship is emphasized by the warm colors surrounding them.



Aurora’s innocence is amplified by warm colors when faced with the device.

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The cronos device looks like a golden cockroach like that of Mexican mythology.



The golden cockroach cronos device does provide eternal life.



Jesus becomes addicted to the immortality offered by the device.

The film introduces the negative associations with cockroaches and eternal life when Angel learns of the archangel statue and seeks to retrieve it for his dying uncle and benefactor, de la Guardia. Angel also initiates the change from the warmth of the Gris home and antique shop to the cold lifelessness of the de La Guardia factory and residence. There his uncle lives in a germ-free environment lit like a horror setting. Such a change of setting deliberately draws on the chiaroscuro of gothic film, according to del Toro's production notes.

Jesus's first encounter with the Cronos device then begins to disrupt the warmth of his home and shop as it begins to transform him from human to immortal insect vampire. Although it looks like a wind-up toy with a playful display, the device pierces Jesus's palm, leaving a pool of blood. Jesus seems to react with thirst to the sting, drinking nearly a pitcher of water directly out of the refrigerator. A plate of meat seems to arouse him and it begins to glow and turn even more blood red. When the hunger grows more powerful, he uses the device again, exposing the cockroach mechanism that controls it. Aurora watches from the head of the stairs as the device begins to work and Jesus recites the Lord's Prayer. We then see the inner workings of the device as it penetrates him. Clock gears turn and fill a cockroach with fluid. When it finishes, the device disconnects. The next morning Jesus awakens feeling and looking younger, even shaving off his moustache. When he enters the kitchen, though, Jesus lowers the blinds because the light bothers him, an act that begins to expose the repercussions associated with this kind of eternal life.

Jesus's renewed life force also triggers a counterattack from de la Guardia. When a revived grandpa Jesus goes to his shop, the lock has been broken, and the shop is in shambles. A card has been left there with Angel's name on it and a note, "We are open all night." When Jesus enters the de la Guardia factory, he leaves the warmth of his antique shop and home behind. It is almost as dark and gray in de la Guardia's enormous room. Because he is dying, de la Guardia will do anything to get the device and prolong his life, even with his own cancerous body parts in jars around him. Now that he has tasted its results, however, Jesus will not relinquish it. Instead, he again applies the device, broaching cockroach mythology as he anthropomorphizes its contents, asking it as it completes its work, "Who are you, little one?" he asks. "A god?" He has not yet acknowledged his own transformation into something close to the insect from which he draws eternal life.

At a New Year's party, however, the disastrous repercussions of Jesus's transformation become clearer. Jesus and his wife Mercedes (Margarita Isabel) act like young lovers until another guest gets a nosebleed and rushes to the restroom. Jesus follows and focuses intently on the man's blood, nearly licking it off the sink before another guest cleans it. More blood is on the floor, so Jesus kneels down and begins to lick it slowly. Insect noises seem to accompany his thirst, suggesting he is turning into a man-sized cockroach like the one inside the device. Angel disturbs his feeding when he knocks him unconscious. When Jesus awakens, he is at the wheel of a car,



The transformation turns Jesus into a creature of the night.



Jesus now craves blood. Immortality has monstrous repercussions.



De la Guardia seeks the immortality Jesus has found in the device.



Angel represents the Angel of death in the film.

and Angel pushes it over a cliff. At the bottom, Jesus exclaims, “I don’t want to die today” and thinks of Aurora, even after his body is carted off to a funeral home where he escapes before being cremated.

The final battle between warm and cold, good and evil, and the cockroach’s life-giving and treacherous qualities occurs because Jesus wants to escape the horror he has become. To better use the device or to stop his pain, Jesus must find the alchemist’s book in the de la Guardia factory. Aurora follows and finds the book, but the relevant pages are missing. De la Guardia has eaten them and declares that Jesus has been reborn. To illustrate this rebirth, de la Guardia peels off Jesus’s old useless skin, revealing the white new skin beneath it. Jesus needs human blood, de la Guardia explains, and now can survive like any bloodsucking insect. When Jesus gives de la Guardia the Cronos device to be free of the curse it contains, de la Guardia attacks him with the sharp end of his cane. “You don’t even bleed right,” he says, but before he can pierce Jesus’s heart, Aurora smashes the old man’s head, killing him.

The battle between the two opposing forces connected with the device and its insect center are resolved when Jesus defeats Angel during the fight’s climax. To save himself and his family, Jesus falls with Angel off the factory’s neon sign, suggesting a merging of the warmth of the neon and the cold of the factory. Angel is dead, but Aurora revives Jesus with the device. When Aurora seems ready to sacrifice herself for him, giving him her blood with one word, “Grandpa,” Jesus draws on the humane qualities deep within him and smashes the device, freeing himself and his family from his curse. The last shot of the film shows him in his new skin, lying in bed with Aurora beside him. Mercedes enters the room, and they share a loving family moment before his death.

In these last scenes, immortality and the cockroach device that produces it are constructed as immoral and, as de la Guardia presents it, evil. Jesus may have become a literal Christ figure with his ultimate sacrifice for the common good. But he has also merged with the cockroach from which he draws his longevity and sought an “unnatural” eternal life. As Roger Ebert suggests, “There is always something shameful ... about being unwilling to die when your time has come. *Cronos* adds a religious edge to this moral claim, demonstrating perhaps that an Earthly immortality is a “greater punishment” than death, since our role in this world is “to prepare for the next” (Ebert). Because this immortality is associated explicitly with the cockroach—both the golden cockroach exterior of the device and its inner insect workings—it too must be destroyed.

Conclusion

Ultimately, *Cronos* and the other cockroach horror films discussed here also make a larger statement about people’s exploitation of the natural world. In these films, such exploitation turns insects into monsters, creating a monstrous nature that must be eradicated. Although the level of anthropomorphizing in these films coincides to a certain extent with the quality of treatment the insects receive, whether the films in question highlight the positive or negative qualities of cockroaches has no effect on this lethal conclusion.

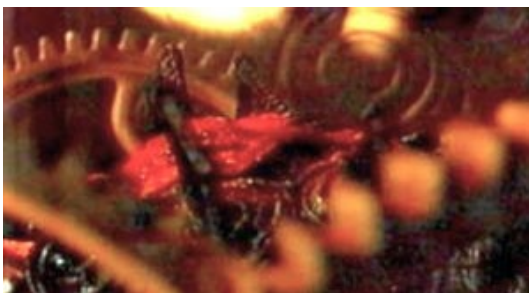
Unlike insect horror films highlighting less repulsive bugs like butterflies and moths, cockroach horror films anthropomorphize roaches to reveal their monstrous human-related qualities even though the cockroach is, in



Angel and Jesus battle for the cronos device.



The mechanism reveals that a cockroach runs the internal workings of the device.



We see the cockroach only briefly inside the device.



fact, seen in a more positive light in many cultures. In China, Thailand, Australia, South America, and French Guiana, cockroaches serve as food, traditional medicine, and folktale source. Copeland suggests that studies by anthropologists and explorers reveal that “rather than racking their brains for effective ways to destroy cockroaches, these cultures found the cockroach a useful neighbor, rich in protein and effective for many human diseases. They also seem to have recognized how useful they were to the environment” (81-2). Copeland also notes that cockroaches contribute to cancer research (131), a point that connects explicitly with the entomologist work in *Mimic*.

Because of these strengths, Copeland believes we can learn from cockroaches. She suggests in “Voices of the Least Loved,” for example, “the necessity of humans drastically altering our current cultural and personal assumptions about ourselves and the rest of the living world (and, of course, of altering the behavior such assumptions foster) is critical if we hope *Homo sapiens* is to enjoy anything approaching the long, successful life story of the cockroach” (170). In *Cockroach*, Copeland goes even further, arguing, “our survival as a species may depend on discovering a saviour who looks at us from many-faceted eyes that replace our own myopic human view with the cockroach’s ‘very long view indeed’” (168).

In contrast to Copeland positive view, the horror films we explored anthropomorphize cockroaches in order to vilify them, not learn from their strengths. The anthropomorphism utilized in the cockroach films explored here does not, as Mertins suggests, lead to positive representations. Although *Damnation Alley*, *The Nest*, and *Mimic* blame humanity for transforming the lowly cockroach into a flesh-eating monster, none of these films suggest that humanity should be destroyed, no matter how adroitly the insects are anthropomorphized. *Damnation Alley* includes little or no anthropomorphizing but both *The Nest* and *Mimic* anthropomorphize on several levels. In *Mimic*, the Judas Breed’s protective stance toward their offspring might even indicate a social level of anthropomorphism. These three films all illustrate the monstrous qualities of cockroaches so their destruction becomes not only feasible but also desirable.

Bug and *Cronos* take a more individual approach to cockroach monsters, illustrating perhaps what happens when humanity embraces the cockroach and its strengths so vehemently that both cockroach and human are transformed. The levels of anthropomorphizing are amplified in both these films because of the integral connection between the roaches and their human counterparts. One might argue that Jesus, for example, becomes a humanized version of the cockroach. In *Bug*, on the other hand, the roaches gain such a high degree of human intelligence that they not only become literate, but also responsibly rid the world of its dangerous mad scientist.

Horror films from *Damnation Alley* to *Mimic* reinforce stereotypes as they highlight humanity’s ambivalence toward cockroaches. *Damnation Alley* and *The Nest* clearly construct cockroaches as monsters with no redeeming qualities. *Mimic*, *Bug*, and *Cronos*, however, draw on positive qualities associated with cockroaches, including their contributions to human health, their intelligence, and their longevity. Yet these films also turn these strengths into detriments and consequently, turn cockroaches into horrific monsters. They are “Others” whose humanlike qualities grow into a monstrous nature not only because this is a convention of the horror genre, but also because their transformation is either a product of a genetic, chemical, or nuclear eco-disaster or a violation of human and nonhuman

Jesus begins to lose his humanity as the device changes him.



Aurora revives Jesus after a final battle with Angel.

nature alike. In these films, both the human “scientist” or “victim” and the cockroach must be annihilated to eliminate their “evil” influence, a destruction that signifies perhaps a desire to eliminate the most monstrous elements of human and nonhuman nature. When monstrous nature becomes anthropomorphized, it may become too human, making it too easy to see us in them.



The question remains: are cockroaches a horror or savior?

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Notes

1. Mixed versions of the cockroach myth appear in films such as *Naked Lunch* (1991) and *Joe's Apartment* (1993), as well. [[return to page 1](#)]

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Films that have an observer to torture:



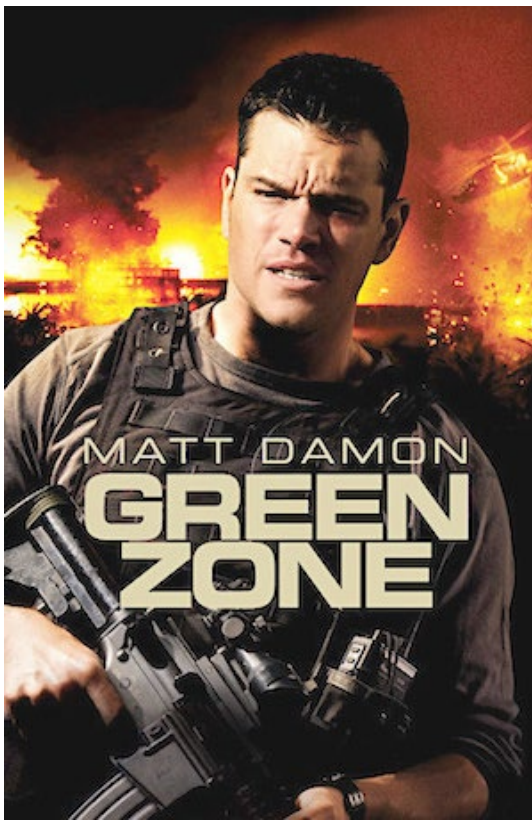
U.S. ambivalence about torture: an analysis of post-9/11 films

by [Jean Rahbar](#)

In the Fall of 2011, I began researching U.S. ambivalence on the topic of torture as reflected in film. I felt that the examination of popular films depicting Americans torturing Middle Easterners might give insights into how U.S. viewers manage their ambivalence when confronted with evidence of torture during the War on Terror. The recent controversy surrounding the film *Zero Dark Thirty* (Bigelow et al. & Bigelow, 2013) has provided further evidence for the salience of this topic in collective consciousness. Even though lawmakers and key individuals in the film industry have criticized *Zero Dark Thirty* (Bigelow et al. & Bigelow, 2013) for implying that torture was an effective means toward the elimination of Osama Bin Laden, Kathryn Bigelow, the director of this film has countered this criticism through statements such as “those of us who work in the arts know that depiction is not endorsement” (Bigelow, n.d., para. 8). Despite the nature of Bigelow’s comment about the power of film, she was not nominated in the best director category in 2013 for an Academy Award despite her previous win for the film *The Hurt Locker* (Bigelow et al. & Bigelow, 2010) in 2010. With interest and focus on the power of film not only from the film community but also from politicians alike, research which examines the nature of film on the topic of torture is perhaps more relevant now than before the release of this hugely popular film (that earned an Academy Award nomination for Best Picture and a reported \$24 million in the box office). This essay is also one contribution in the long, on-going discussion among *Jump Cut* authors[1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] about the United States’ involvement in torture. This dialogue in *Jump Cut* began after the release of the first Abu Ghraib images published in *The New Yorker* and broadcast on CBS’ *60 Minutes* program in April 2004.

Major finding

I began this project by examining the responses to Pew polls, which revealed that most Americans support invisible forms of torture (e.g. beating the soles of feet, social isolation) but disapprove of more visible forms (physical beating of the whole body). I then viewed a number of feature films from a genre that film bloggers often refer to as “Iraq War films.” Through an investigation of how attitudes are promoted via the technical aspect of filmmaking (e.g. choreographing of characters, lighting, sound), I was surprised to find out that six out of the seven films[2] I studied had plots that narrated a pro-human rights, “torture-is-wrong” stance, but other moments in these films expressed the belief that torture is

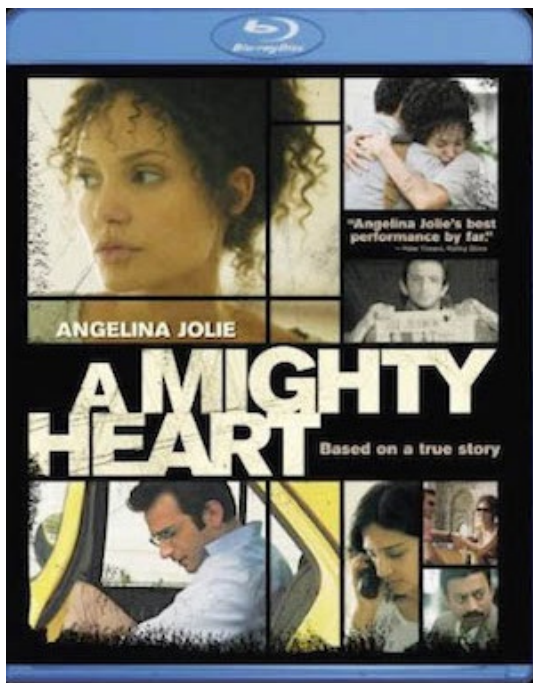


a necessity, but only when it is used to benefit U.S. interests. (Only one film —*Syriana* (Nozik et al. & Gaghan, 2005—appeared neutral about torture.) The attitude of a provisional acceptance of torture demonstrated in six of seven the films was facilitated through the film’s setting up a triangular relation between “the torturer,” “the torture victim” and another character whom I call “the onlooker.” The onlooker is the third individual in a torture scene, who emotionally struggles while viewing the abuse, as evidenced by their wincing, but never actually stops the torture.

Given the consistent presence of an onlooker in six out of the seven films, I realized two important points are likely communicated to the public through the depiction of such a character’s discomfort:

- that torture is acceptable as long as one feels uncomfortable about it —our discomfort absolves us of blame; and
- as Americans, it is acceptable to outsource our sadistic impulses to others (in this case the Middle Eastern torturer, who tortures and does so without apparent guilt).

These findings led me to wonder whether the guilt experienced by the onlooker (and ultimately the viewer) is due to the U.S lack of adherence to its explicit commitment to human rights, or to the viewer’s actual concern for another person. Psychoanalytically, the viewers’ discomfort allows them (through identification with this character) to reap the benefits of torture while outwardly expressing their disapproval of the torture itself. According to Darius Rejali (2007), author of *Torture and Democracy*, the United States (and other democratic nations) have a history of engaging in “invisible” or “silent” forms of torture that make it harder to prove that the abuse has actually occurred. Therefore, in such a mise-en-scene with an onlooker witnessing torture, a need and desire to engage in torture is reflected in the onlooker’s passive participation, yet s/he is simultaneously uncomfortable, expressing ambivalence about what is occurring before him/her.



Feminist film theory

Despite the fact that all torture victims were male in this particular study, examining feminist film theory provides insight into the nature of the torture victim's objectification and how the onlooker (and ultimately the viewer) is cinematically directed to look at the torture victim. To capture and explain how women in film are simultaneously being looked at and displayed for the audience, feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey coined the term "to-be-looked-at-ness," (Erens, 1990). According to Mulvey, women in film are visually coded with strong erotic impact and as a result become the "bearer[s] of meaning, not maker[s] of meaning" (Erens, 1990, p. 33). This important distinction reveals that female characters do not establish how others see them—instead, the viewer (and in this case the onlooker) does. In a similar manner, the torture victim is an object for both the onlooker and ultimately the viewer to manipulate. The torture victim's captive position is used to justify the onlooker's need to look at the torture and desire to dominate him/her, as well as why the onlooker does not physically participate in the physical abuse. The torture victim's position in the film is not meaningful in of itself (his subjective experience of pain is of no importance), rather his meaning is contingent upon viewers who may only value his suffering in so much as it reminds them of their own.

"Male gaze"

Foucault (1973) first used the term "medical gaze" to describe the process of medical diagnosis in the power dynamics between the doctor/patient relationship. The gaze is therefore not something that one has, but is a relationship that one enters. The "male gaze," similar to the medical gaze, is a term used in feminist film theory to describe power relations between the male looker and a female object. It occurs when the camera puts the audience into the perspective of a heterosexual man. For example, the camera can facilitate power dynamics and the male gaze by lingering over the curves of a woman's body. The individual being objectified in film is both an erotic object for the other character and the viewer. In this regard, what matters

"is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance" (Erens, 1990, p.33).

In precisely the same manner, the torture victim is unimportant. The torture victim is sexualized and degraded, affording the onlooker and ultimately the viewer an emotional distance needed so that the audience does not need to know the subjectivity of the torture victim. The torture





The onlooker to torture in these films passively participates in the act yet is uncomfortable, expressing ambivalence about what is happening.

victim is eroticized and marginalized cinematically (to be discussed in the examples below) in a ways that alleviate the onlooker's possible sense of wrongdoing.

Three looks

Mulvey (Erens, 1990) describes three "looks" that help to establish a power imbalance in film. The first is the perspective of the male character on screen and how he perceives the female character. The second is the perspective of the spectators as they see the female character on screen. The third look brings the two perspectives together, involving the male audience member's perspective of the male character in the film. The third perspective also allows the male audience member to take the female character as his own sex object, because he can relate it himself through looking to the male character on screen. While these looks have been developed in reference to the male gazer and the female object in cinema, film theorists have acknowledged that the gazer and object of desire may be either male or female. In fact, Hanson (1986) argues that men too have the capacity of being viewed as objects of desire (Bergstrom, 1979; Hanson, 1986). Additionally, authors Bergstrom (1979) and Clover (1992) note that men and women can identify with male or female characters successively or simultaneously, and that our identification is essentially without gender (e.g. male audience members identifying with the domineering aspects of a female character).

Film examples

The following still shots exemplify how the viewer is encouraged to take the torture victim as their object. Nearly all films contained an uncomfortable onlooker and used a similar cinematic language to facilitate the onlooker's taking of the torture victim as their object. Figure 1 features a torture scene from the film *Rendition* (Golin et al. & Hood, 2007) with a naked torture victim.

(1)



Not only is his sexuality emphasized through lighting which highlights his tense musculature and body positioning (legs squeezed tightly together), but the audience member can also take the torture victim as his or her own sexual object through their identification with the male character on screen (in this case, the torturer) based on Mulvey's third perspective. While the onlooker is not visible in this particular still shot, he is present in the scene. The viewer's primary identification or conscious identification is with the onlooker, and his/her unconscious or secondary identification is with the torturer. The camera facilitates the process of the onlooker taking the torture victim as the audience's object by filming the torturer at a higher position than the torture victim. Simultaneously the audience is looking at the two individuals through an observing position (suggesting the audience's passivity in the torture). From this particular positioning, the audience is afforded the opportunity to remain neutral and at a distance emotionally from the torture.

Objectification of both the torture victim and the torturer

Figures 2 and 3 (from the film *Rendition*) are still shots that not only reinforce the objectification of the torture victim, but also the objectivity of the torturer. The torturer is someone who can be used in respect to audience member's sadistic desire to administer torture, while at the same time not having to consciously own this desire. By rendering the torturer as someone who lacks subjectivity, it is easy to place this character into Western collective unconscious about what a Middle Eastern torturer might look and behave like.

(2)



(3)



His objectivity is reinforced by the way the camera looks up at the torturer. Similarly figure 3 uses an “over the shoulder” shot as the torturer stands in a classic authoritarian position with his legs apart. Without any direct view of his face and expression as he tortures, he—like the torture victim—is a tool used to fulfill the onlooker’s and ultimately the viewer’s ambivalent attitudes about torture. Aside from the camera’s field of vision, cool colors and Islamic chanting—which all help to instill a sense of purpose in administering the torture—the torturer is a brutal and unflinching object that delivers the torture. The only person with complicated or mixed feelings about the torture is the onlooker. The onlooker in this particular film is played by actor Jake Gyllenhaal, who is narrated as both feeling the need to be present for the torture and at the same time desiring to look away. The emotional difficulty of his position is demonstrated not only by the confused look on his face, but also through the way he is placed always in the distance yet at the same time present. The camera often looks to him to register his expression.

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Detailed analysis of the cinematic techniques

The following section offers the reader a shot by shot analysis of the cinematic techniques used in the first torture scene of the film *Rendition*. *Rendition* embodied the classic characteristics of the uncomfortable onlooker, sadistic torturer and objectified torture victim.

This particular torture scene uses a number of overlapping techniques (i.e. the simultaneous use of dark music, along with the use of cool colors and a camera viewpoint angled up) that help to contribute to notion that the torture victim is guilty (even though he is not guilty at the time of the torture or even deemed guilty later in the film). This appears to justify his being tortured. These techniques also suggest the torturer's comfort with administering the torture (and the onlooker's discomfort). For purposes of simplification, the torture victim (El-Ibrahimi), the torturer (Naor), and the onlooker (Freeman) will all be referred to by their generalized name: (i.e. torture victim, torturer and onlooker).



32:30: The torture victim is hooded and forced out of the back of a car. The audience can hear his moans of pain as he is physically forced out by two men. The camera focuses very little on the identity of the men who are taking him from the back of the car and into solitary confinement. The scene is also very dark, helping to suggest that the audience too should not focus too long on what is occurring. After the torture victim is thrown into solitary confinement, the door quickly shuts and the scene abruptly ends. No narration of what his confinement feels like is offered, aside from a brief shot detailing the artificial light which is also illuminating the center of the cell. The audience understands that the torture victim is forced into confinement, and then the scene changes as the door slams shut. The

entire scene is relatively brief and lasts 36 seconds until 32:45, suggesting again that the audience should not focus too long on what is occurring.

32:45: The next scene begins with the torture victim's American wife seeking information on her missing husband's whereabouts. She is shown in bright natural lighting in contrast to the darkness of the prior scene, and natural light suggests her innocence. The torture victim's wife is inquiring about his whereabouts as she talks to an U.S. friend who has political connections. He tries to help by making a phone call. Both characters are in natural light, reinforcing their goodness and desire to help.



34:57: The onlooker enters the compound where the torture is about to take place. He enters through a large wooden door. Sunlight illuminates his face, suggesting his innocence relative to the darkness of the torture, which is about to take place. He looks weary and vigilant in this setting, looking side to side, checking his surroundings in this unfamiliar place. Overall he looks disoriented and uncomfortable within the compound, suggesting his ambivalence.



35:04: The camera offers an establishing shot of the compound and the building where the torture is conducted. The long shot helps to demonstrate the emotional distance that exists between the onlooker and all that is associated the torture. The torture is about to take place in the building located at the end of the shot.



35:08: The camera cuts to a freeze frame of the torturer standing in the doorway of the building where the torture is about to take place. His body language looks bold in contrast to the onlooker's hesitation about the space. The torturer looks confident and prepared for what is about to take place (torture).



35:11: Once again the onlooker looks awkward and ill at ease. We hear the sound of his footsteps marking the long distance from the entry gate to the building where the torture is about to take place. His awkwardness and his walking a long corridor help to reinforce his hesitation about the torture and that he is not in total agreement about the torture that is about to occur.



35:12: The torturer looks squarely at the camera, appearing confident and prepared for what is to come next (torture). His attitude contrasts the awkwardness of the onlooker. He appears resolute and unemotional compared to the onlooker's awkwardness and emotionality.



35:18: The onlooker's small size relative to the torturer's large size is emphasized—the onlooker is the small dot located at the end of the long walkway, while the torturer's back is in the foreground. The use of a long shot again helps to reinforce the onlooker's innocence and discomfort about the torture.

The onlooker enters the torturer's office (not the room where the torture is conducted) and takes a seat, whiskey is offered, the onlooker refuses, almonds are offered. Gyllenhaal hands over a folded-up list of questions to ask the torture victim. The torturer explains that Gyllenhaal can observe, but not participate. The handing off of a list of questions helps to emphasize the onlooker's passivity in the torture.

The film cuts to a different scene entirely, narrating Middle Eastern youth in a large room. They are being taught and influenced by Muslim extremist thinking.



38:11: The film cuts back to the torture victim as he is forcibly stripped and his clothes are cut off his body. The camera is careful not to show the torture victim's face during this process. This helps to depersonalize the experience of being stripped naked, a process which might make the viewer overly uncomfortable. The audience only sees the torture victim's back. The scene is set in harsh lighting. The audience does not see the individuals administering the torture in any detail. The audience can hear his struggle. He moans while his clothes are stripped from his body, but again his face is not shown, helping to emotionally distance the viewer from the discomforts and emotional trauma of being stripped naked.

38:14: The scene goes dark, facilitating the audience's sense of disorientation and perhaps the audience's need to not bear witness to the torture for too long. Dark music and shots of young extremists

being taught by their leaders are interwoven throughout the scene. Interwoven are visual and audible information of the torture victim being stripped naked, dark music, and radical Muslim teachings, all of which help to establish a connection between the three in the viewer's mind. While the torture victim is not known to be guilty at this point, the use of dark music and extremist chanting in addition to brief shots of him being tortured all suggest that these three components are interrelated.

38:25: Interwoven between shots of the torture victim grunting and struggling continue as his clothes continue to be cut off, are the voices of Muslim extremists and their teachings.



38:31: The torture victim's clothes continue to be cut off while only the lower portion of his head is shown. Not showing the torture victim's eyes seems to dehumanize and depersonalize the experience of being stripped naked.



38:3: The Muslim radical teachings continue in between shots of the torture victim being tortured, again helping to suggest a connection between Muslim extremism and the presumed guilt of the torture victim.



38:56: The torture victim stands shackled and barefoot on dirty wet, hard ground. Cool colors and dark music are used to facilitate the audience's emotional disconnection from the scene.

39:49: Muslim extremist teachings continue, as students chant the English equivalent of "God is great" while raising their fists in the air.



39:55: The onlooker follows the torturer into the torture area, again suggesting the onlooker's passivity in this scene (i.e. he is a follower and not a leader in the torture). The sounds of extremist chanting continue, helping to heighten the viewer's sense of emotionality about the torture.



39:58: The lighting shifts to cool blues and grays from the red tones found earlier in the torturer's office and the natural sunlight used in the long shot (35:04) of the torture compound.



40:22: The onlooker looks at a well-illuminated torture victim but catches the torture victim returning his stare which causes him to look away. He also appears to lick his lips in discomfort (40:22). The onlooker's discomfort appears to absolve him of blame.



40:23: The torture victim is well illuminated and appears nervous, but it is unclear as to why he feels nervous. There is a tense expression on his face, so that his nervousness seems to suggest that perhaps he is guilty.



40:24: The torturer appears confident and prepared to administer the torture as evidenced by his authoritative stance in this scene. The angle of the camera (looking up at the torturer) suggests that the torturer should be feared. Meanwhile the onlooker is not in the frame for a number of seconds, suggesting his disconnection to the torturer and torture itself. The audience understands that the onlooker is at the back of the room and is not to interfere—as he was instructed by the torture prior to entering this torture room.



40:41: The torture victim nervously explains that no one has told him why he is there and he asks for his clothes (torture victim is presumably naked, although the camera does not narrate this fact, again helping to emotionally distance the viewer from the act of being tortured). This particular shot conveys the onlooker's confusion and perhaps concern as the torture victim explains his emotionally rattled state. The camera focuses on the onlooker as the torture victim

explains himself, suggesting that onlooker has empathy for the torture victim. Thus the onlooker is able to occupy two positions: 1) his role as a passive participator in the torture and 2) the role of an empathetic person who watches the torture with discomfort.

41:07: After the torture victim raises his voice demanding justice for himself and the torturer calmly replies that the prisoner needs to answer some questions truthfully first, the camera shifts back to the onlooker. "Sir, are you American?" the onlooker asks. The onlooker looks down for one second in what appears to be discomfort and then looks back. The onlooker's body language expresses his ambivalence. On the one hand he stays in the room and watches, but on the other, he does not stop the torture. Rather he just feels uncomfortable about it.



41:25: The positioning of the torturer's body as the camera looks up at him from the torture victim's perspective suggests that the audience should be afraid of the torturer.



41:36: The lighting highlights half of the onlooker's face, helping to suggest his ambivalence about being in the room while the torture is being conducted.



42:57: The camera focuses on the onlooker while the torture victim explains himself nervously, suggesting that the onlooker's emotions and thoughts about what the torture victim is saying are more important than his discomfort.



44:47: This particular shot highlights the torturer's sadism with the camera eye level with the torturer's waist after he strikes the prisoner without warning. The camera's angle up helps the audience to fear the torturer. The torture victim looks up at the abuser from the ground, naked and shackled. The torturer also instructs his assistants to put the prisoner "in the hole." However, yet again, the torture victim's experience of the "hole" is entirely neglected.



44:50: High contrast lighting illuminates the onlooker's face, suggesting his ambivalence about being in the torture room.



45:00: The torture victim is carried off into solitary confinement; however, the torture victim is not well lit, nor are the individuals carrying him off as he struggles. This helps to keep the audience's attention off the experience of being dragged away to solitary confinement.



45:06: The onlooker looks down as the door to the solitary confinement room is slammed shut. His looking down suggests his ambivalence about what has and is taking place (torture).



45:17: The torture victim's screams are audible and the torturer looks to the onlooker after washing a drop of blood from his hands. The torturer's face is fully illuminated, suggesting his emotional clarity about striking the torture victim and sending him off to solitary confinement.

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Further investigation of the onlooker



(29)

Figures 29 and 30, from two separate films: *Green Zone* (Bevan et al. & Greengrass, 2010) and *Unthinkable* (Weber et al. & Jordan, 2010), narrate the discomfort of two different onlookers. Figure 29 narrates the onlooker scratching his neck and looking away and to the side, while figure 30 shows a female onlooker covering her mouth and looking down. Aside from the specific body language of these two onlookers, close-ups and the diegetic sound of the torture victims' groans and whimpers are used to highlight the onlooker's emotion rather than to gain the sympathy of the audience on behalf of the torture victim.

Rules versus caring



(30)

Upon even deeper examination of the concept of guilt, an important question emerges: does onlookers' conflict arise from the feeling that they (i.e. Americans) should adhere to a rule without exception (i.e. the United States' anti-torture policy, even in the case that such information could be used to save innocent U.S. lives), or does their guilt arise from watching another person suffer? Furthermore, what does this particular body of film suggest about viewers' guilt—i.e. from which path does their guilt originate? Sagan (1988) illustrates the distinction between conscience and superego (feeling that rules must be adhered to without exception) by referencing "Huck's dilemma" from the book *Huckleberry Finn*. While Huck's racist superego demands that he must turn his runaway slave companion to authorities, his loving conscience longs to protect his friend. While Huck's dilemma is clearly delineated by Sagan (1988), it is unclear where the onlooker's guilt originates. Even though Sagan (1988) suggests that caring for others comes from an early identification with a nurturing mother, it is unclear if in fact the onlooker cares personally about the pain being inflicted upon the torture victim or is uncomfortable because rules are being broken and an exception to the United States' strict pro-human rights position is being made.

Evidence of caring

In some moments in films that depict torture, the onlooker does in fact feel for the pain of the torture victim. For example, the character Agent Brody (from the film *Unthinkable*) attends to the torture victim with a towel after the prisoner has been heavily hosed with cold water, which demonstrates at least the appearance of someone who cares about his pain. Similarly, Freeman's character (the onlooker) in the film *Rendition* yells "enough, enough" mid-electrocution of the torture victim. However not only do these attempts appear weak in alleviating the torture victim's overall pain, but also both onlooker-characters are narrated through the bulk of their respective films as standing by, fully knowing that torture is occurring, in addition to the fact that these two specific characters also physically participate in torture.



(31)



(32)

The ambiguity of the onlooker's caring is further elaborated through the artistry and cinematic techniques used in these films. For example, in one scene Agent Brody's physical stance is facilitated by an angled camera, suggesting an uncertainty or hesitation about the torture occurring in the next room over (figure 31). Then, seconds later, the camera squares up to her shoulders narrating a more resolute body posture (Figure 32). While in the first figure she appears uncertain about whether the torture should occur, the squaring of her shoulders to the camera suggests that ultimately she believes in the necessity of the torture. A different scene from *Body of Lies* (Scott et al. & Scott, 2008) narrates of a close-up Ferris' character (the onlooker). He appears to be not only in discomfort but anguish as another man is tortured. By choosing to narrate a close-up of Ferris' face, rather than a shot of the torture victim being beaten, Ferris' anguish feels more important than the torture victim's pain. He appears to be in disagreement with the torture by not participating and the look of anguish upon his face, yet he does not make any physical efforts to stop it. Thus he and other onlookers are able to play both sides of the fence (i.e. at times feeling pain for the torture victim, and at other times passively and even actively participating in the torture), while the rationale for their discomfort is not clearly delineated.

Conflict within the superego

Aside from the demands the superego places on the self to protect innocent U.S. life, it is also a rule violation to harm another person. The superego[3] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) is instrumental in controlling the sadistic impulses of the id by adhering to rules that work in protection of the greater good. However, a tension exists between the part of the self that feels that they should participate in torture in order to protect innocent U.S. lives and the part of self, also governed by the superego, which feels that it is wrong to hurt another person. While Sagan (1988) stresses that people who perform evil acts on other people are not necessarily evil in nature but are working under the banner of a racist, classist and/or sexist internalization of cultural values, he neglects to resolve the part of the self (i.e. superego) that feels it must adhere to a no-harm policy. Lifton (1986) helps to illustrate the demands of an authoritative superego based on his research about the famous Nazi concentration camp doctors. Lifton (1986) stresses that these particular doctors were not psychopaths, but misguided idealists who were working strongly under the "banner of the superego" (Sagan, 1988). They also thought of the idea of death camps as a necessary component in the elimination of disease. Carveth (2010) explains that although outsiders viewing the Nazi doctors' actions would like to think of them as "sadistic, id-driven psychopaths" (p. 109), they were neither brilliant, nor stupid, neither inherently evil nor particularly ethically sensitive. They were by no means the demonic figures (sadistic, fanatic, lustful to kill) people have often thought them to be. Based on the presence of this psychological tension (struggling between the desire to protect innocent life and at the same time the desire to do no harm), the onlooker (and U.S. audience) may be experiencing some degree of emotional

paralysis (as evidenced by their discomfort, yet passively standing by as the torture occurs). On an emotional level, their paralysis might also serve as punishment for condoning torture.

“Assertion of the ideological”

When considering the larger implications of this study and what it might mean in terms of gaining the U.S. support for using torture on real life terror suspects, Davis’ (2003) theory on the “assertion of the ideological” is useful to consider. Davis (2003) explains that individuals, rather than resolving the “ego shattering trauma” of events like 9/11, will do almost anything in their power to make sure that their experience of pain has been “fully constituted” (Davis, 2003, para. 3). Thus audiences, through their identification with the onlooker, get to play out fantasies of being the freedom-loving, do-gooder American while simultaneously reaping the benefits of torture and engaging in fantasies of sadistic and sexual pleasure. Davis (2003) argues that the only way to move forward beyond tragedy is to recognize, be aware of one’s loss and mourn it without trying to fill voids through wishing or causing destruction to others.

As Nancy Hollander (2010), a defense lawyer who has famously represented a number of thought-to-be terrorists, poignantly summarizes:

“I was more afraid of the reaction to the terrorists than of the terrorists themselves ... What kind of question is ‘Why do they hate us? We know that for years the aim of this country’s foreign policy has been to control others’ resources and governments’ ... there is this constant battle: on the one hand, this terrible thing that has happened; and on the other, the retaliatory revenge strategy that was developed almost immediately, which I could not bear.” (Hollander, 2010, p. 5)

By participating in the discourse utilized in this particular body of film, U.S. film watchers are afforded the luxury of not having to own their own destructive impulses and as such, not having to know their own sense of loss as a result of 9/11. Without having to acknowledge one’s destructive impulses, one does not have to mourn and therefore acknowledge how one’s participation in film-watching might be contributing to the real-life treatment of U.S.-held terror suspects. Audience members can therefore engage in guilt-free watching, without being labeled a watcher or even someone who enjoys watching torture. After all, the audience member is not the onlooker, even though their identification may be tied up in this particular character.

Additionally post 9/11 films with torture scenes in them appear to suggest that a country can actually obtain something real (e.g. information to prevent future terror attacks) on a consistent basis through people’s passive participation in torture (Salek & Flynn, 2013). The films do not narrate the ineffectiveness of torture, or how innocent people have been and continue to be tortured at U.S. hands. Instead, they focus on the necessity of torture and our passive participation. Films only become relevant to a large number of people if the films reflect, augment or deny some aspect of the current wave of thinking. Thus successful or even moderately successful films communicate and reflect the current culture of thinking, even if a given film is thought to be merely fantasy-based (Salek & Flynn, 2013).



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Notes

1. Articles on torture in *Jump Cut* over the past five years:

Jump Cut, No. 51, spring 2009:

Special section: documenting torture—

"Imagining torture" by Chuck Kleinhans. Survey of the fundamental political facts of torture in the present moment in U.S. history and a brief introduction to the visual imagination of torture in fiction film and television.

"Torture documentaries by Julia Lesage." With a close analysis of *Taxi to the Dark Side*, *Standard Operating Procedure*, and *The Road to Guantanamo*, Lesage analyzes the torture documentary in terms of genre structures, torture epistophilia, and affect.

Jump Cut, No. 52, summer 2010:

Special section: Reframing *Standard Operating Procedure*—Errol Morris and the creative treatment of Abu Ghraib—

"Introduction" by David Andrews. This conference report provides an analysis of the debates surrounding Errol Morris' *Standard Operating Procedure* and introduces the two conference panels on this documentary at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies in Los Angeles, with an emphasis on the panel moderated by Linda Williams.

"Feelings of revulsion and the limits of academic discourse" by Bill Nichols. *Standard Operating Procedure* was a monumental box office flop. Does that have anything to do with the feelings of revulsion that it produced in one viewer?

"Speech images: *Standard Operating Procedure* and the staging of interrogation" by Jonathan Kahana. Drawing on the adjacent histories of U.S. war documentary and military psychiatry, *Standard Operating Procedure* provides its subjects with a powerful historical weapon: the confession that functions as an excuse.

"'Cluster fuck:' the forcible frame in Errol Morris's *Standard Operating Procedure*" by Linda Williams. Williams defends Errol Morris' film through an examination of its framings, metaphorical and literal, arguing that even Lynndie England needs to be seen as an ethical being wrestling with her acquiescence to an unethical situation.

"Response" to papers and comments on *Standard Operating Procedure* by Irina Leimbacher

Special section on torture and horror film—

"Torture porn and surveillance culture" by Evangelos Tziallas. A group of "extreme horror" films, known collectively as "torture porn," let us contemplate the social and political ramifications of visibility, exploring the evolution of "the gaze" in the 21st century.

"Tortured logic: entertainment and the spectacle of deliberately inflicted pain in *24* and *Battlestar Galactica*" by Isabel Pinedo. *24* and *Battlestar Galactica*, two television series about our post-9/11 world, tackle the issue of torture from right wing and progressive perspectives, respectively, arriving at diametrically opposed positions.

"Cross-cultural disgust: some problems in the analysis of contemporary horror cinema, part 2: *Public Toilet*, *Visitor Q*" by Chuck Kleinhans. Film artists can expand cinematic disgust beyond shock and gross out. Fruit Chan rewrites human waste in a humanistic global framework while Takahisi Miike uses it for dark social satire.

Jump Cut. No. 50, spring 2008:

"Torture and the national imagination," Jump Cut editorial

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2. Seven films meeting film criteria and used in the research study:

Syriana (Nozik et al. & Gaghan, 2006)

A Mighty Heart (Pitt et al. & Winterbottom, 2007)

The Kingdom (Mann et al. & Berg, 2007)

Rendition (Golin et al. & Hood, 2008)

Body of Lies (Scott et al. & Scott, 2008)

Green Zone (Bevan et al. & Greengrass, 2010)

Unthinkable (Weber et al. & Jordan, 2010)

Research criteria for this particular study:

- Each film must have an "interrogational torture" scene, where someone is asking/demanding for information while the other side resists and demonstrates notable helplessness and/ or fear. More specifically, there is a marked tension between the two characters with the torture victim exhibiting physical signs of fear (e.g. whimpering, crying, begging). In contrast to this dynamic is "punishment," where an individual is physically and/or mentally tortured, but no information is being sought. This distinction is important in distinguishing "torture" from punishment, whereas torture is a "dialogue" and punishment tends not to be. While some films contained torture (e.g. social isolation, physical beatings) in them, there was not always an explicit demand for information made in relation to the torture.
- Each film must have a Middle Eastern/ United States conflict as one of the central themes in the film.
- Each film must be a post 9/11 film and be released between the years 2001-2011.
- Each Film must be fictional in nature.
- Each film must be U.S. produced, directed and/or distributed by one of the major U.S. film producing/distributing companies (demonstrating that the film has permeated U.S. culture).
- Each film must have grossed at least 5 thousand dollars "lifetime gross" according to www.boxofficemojo.com.
- Each film must be recognized by www.boxofficemojo.com and www.imdb.com.
- Each film must be recognized as a "drama" according to www.imdb.com.

3. The use of “superego, id and ego” within the context of this paper, is in reference to the everyday, popular discussion about psychological drives.
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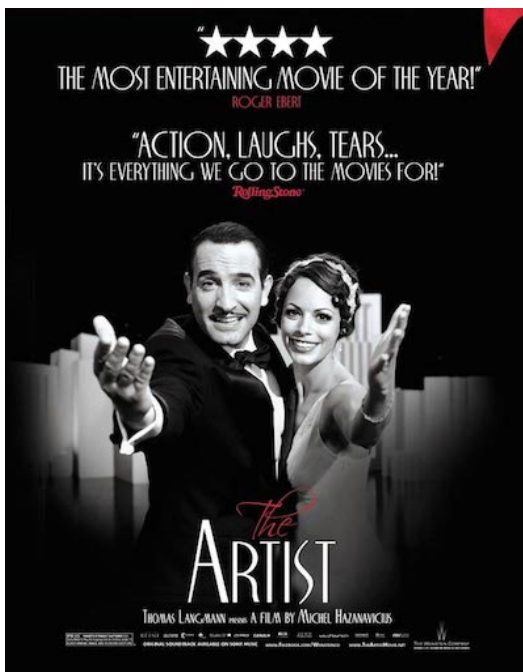
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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Specters of film: new nostalgia movies and Hollywood's digital transition

by [Jason Sperb](#)



“Each of these [2011 Oscar-nominated] movies [*The Artist*, *Hugo*, *Midnight in Paris*] deal with the conflict of reconciling past and present, and offers its own solution and resolutions that while not always practical, satisfy us emotionally. In each we find the pain of nostalgia, the problem of transition, and the power of, and need for, the past.”

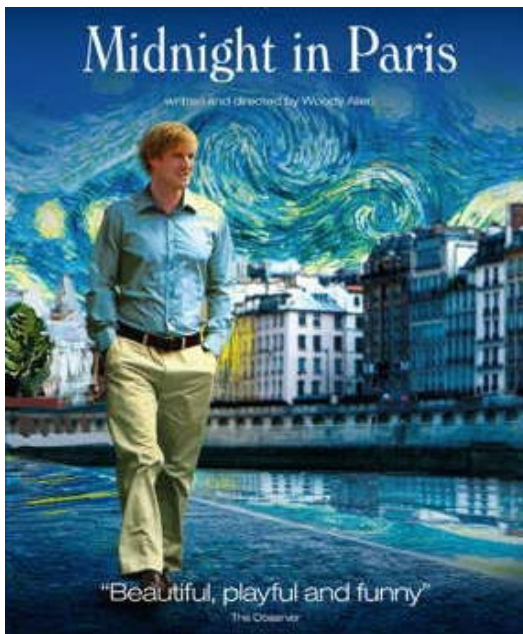
—Andrew Gilbert, “The Death of Film and the Hollywood Response”[1][[open endnotes in new window](#)]

“Except [these films] *don’t speak, and that is the point.*”

—Joshua Clover, “Marx and Coca-Cola”[2]

Nostalgia can be less about reclaiming a vanishing past as resisting a threatening future: how to pull back against the endless rush to change, or against the inevitable end of mortality itself? In 2011, a series of nostalgic love letters—*The Artist*, *Hugo* and *Midnight in Paris*—dominated end-of-the year accolades among film critic circles and industry award shows. In their idiosyncratic, ambivalent ways all three cinephiliac works celebrated the imagined simplicity of film production and exhibition in the late 1920s and early 1930s. At the same time, though less celebrated, the year 2011 also marked two key shifts in cinema’s decades-long digital transition—the wide-scale industrial push to end celluloid projection in theatrical exhibition and to cease production of 35mm cameras (Panavision, ARRI). At the technological dawn of a most fully realized “digital cinema” yet—where every aspect of traditional movie-going (production, distribution and exhibition) was now quite often digital—we instead saw an emphatic celebration of Hollywood’s celluloid past by several famous filmmakers intensely invested in the preservation of film history.

If the stark juxtaposition of film’s past with cinema’s future seemed ironic then, it shouldn’t have. Nostalgia, among other impulses such as observing decadence and decay, is always most intense during periods of dramatic cultural and technological upheaval. At those points the perceived reassurances of a simpler past anchor perceptions of an uncertain present (and future).[3] In this sense, nostalgia is really about the lingering specter of death. The awareness that everything must one day end plants the idea that moments and memories lost will never come again. Paradoxically, personal and collective (cinematic) fantasies of a past that often never existed in the first place become the only way to relive it. Thus, it’s easy to see how the dying



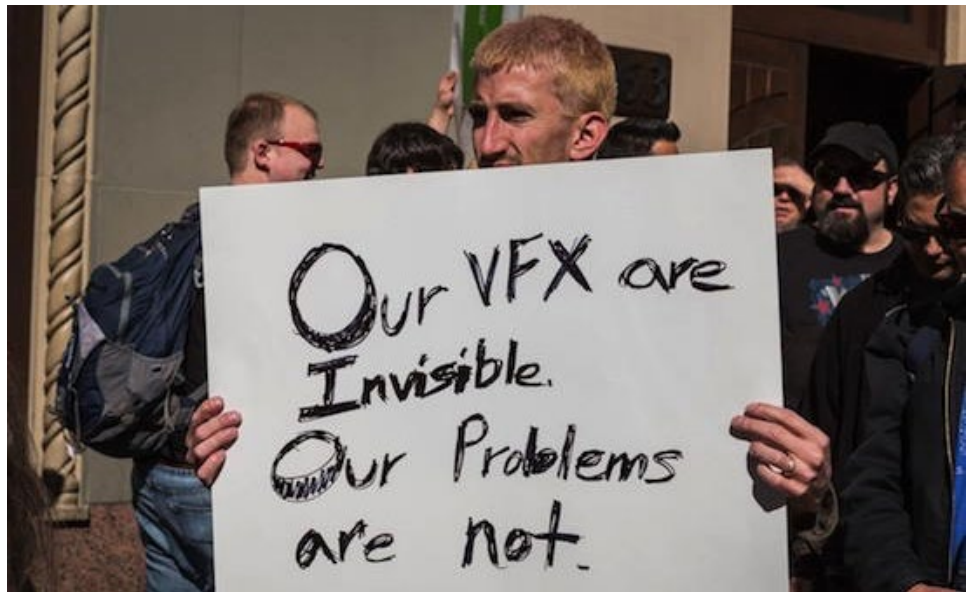
Three Oscar-nominated films of 2011 celebrate the imagined simplicity of film production and exhibition in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

medium of film—imagining its own mortality in sight—would symbolically resist the inevitability of its own digital mummification by retreating back to a joyous youth. There is certainly something sad, even pathetic, about nostalgia. But, if we assume that nostalgia’s function here is partly to ease the transition to the age of a digital cinema that contains no *necessary* relationship to the medium of film, if we see such melancholic impulses as only an attempt to hold onto an idealized past, we also risk further de-rooting other, more pressing, histories at work here beyond the most narratively transparent—i.e., the history of early cinema (*Hugo*) or the history of the transition to sound (*The Artist*).

Looking at many of these 2011 “nostalgia films,” Andrew Gilbert has taken an ambivalent approach to the larger industrial impact of Hollywood’s digital transition. Acknowledging the importance of film nostalgia today, Gilbert also insists that “the change is good; digital is cheaper and quicker.”[4] This democratic logic is in some ways sound. If a flood of low budget digital movies becomes more economically feasible, opening up more avenues (in both production and distribution) for more filmmakers, the hope is that more interesting, maybe even more original, movies will emerge without the pressure of appealing to a mass audience in order to recoup escalating production and promotional expenses. Nostalgia, Gilbert argues, becomes merely a way for the studios to alleviate the tensions inherent in an uncertain, but perhaps profound, moment of industrial change—Hollywood’s “answer to the crisis of this [digital] evolution.”[5]

Yet power relations as described here pose the problem inaccurately. Rather than simply reacting to a transition over which it otherwise has no control, Hollywood is as much to blame for the crisis in question. Meanwhile, the point is not that studios are trying to find a solution so much as they are trying to naturalize the shock of an arbitrary technological change they themselves have forced in the name of economic opportunism. “Harsh economic times and the affordability of digital media” are definitely central factors in pushing the film medium out.[6] Yet the bigger mistake is in failing to foreground the extent to which “harsh economic times and the affordability of digital media” are not two separate phenomena but have instead maintained a mutually-destructive relation over the last several years.

Scholarly discourses on the innovations of digital cinema have still not come to grips with disturbing questions regarding the negative impact on labor forces and economic conditions as a result of the digital transition—what does it mean to be a post-industrial, information-based economy? Film is (was) a *labor-intensive* medium. Yet while it is fair to celebrate some of the money saved as a result of the cheap economics of digital video cinematography, digital Internet distribution, and even perhaps digital theatrical exhibition (for some), it seems fair to ask at what cost? Many aspects of making movies with the medium of film cost more than with digital, yet that’s also because more people were previously employed—from film developers to union projectionists. The transition in the United States from a manufacturing to an information-based economy necessitates more specialized jobs, but for fewer people.



Studies on the digital transition have not yet given full consideration to the impact of innovation on larger labor practices—especially, within the “digital sweatshops” of Hollywood. This crisis came to a head during the Oscar Protests surrounding the abuse of digital VFX and animation workers who contributed to the award-winning *Life of Pi* (2012).

At the same time, even those highly skilled jobs suffer from the decreasing value of labor in the late capitalist marketplace, as demonstrated by the 2013 Oscar protest (since repeated in 2014) around the treatment of effects artists and animators working on *Life of Pi* (2012). Studios saved money by moving to digital production and distribution, but this has not translated to lower ticket prices, for instance—indeed, quite the opposite in an age of IMAX and 3D ticket inflation. And what of the *audience’s own labor* in an age of participatory culture and crowdsourcing, when studios increasingly rely on uncompensated fan production (blogs, videos), the free hype of social media, and other digital avenues to promote high-profile movies at minimal cost?[7] As I’ve discussed previously,[8] there are disturbing *long-term* economic questions in the age of digital cinema—how the digital transition affects the economic viability of film archives, celluloid manufacturers, and independent movie theatres, all of whom risk extinction under the crushing financial burdens which only rise as film itself becomes increasingly rare and thus more expensive.



Hugo (2011) expresses a profound nostalgia for machines—clocks, automatons, trains—an ironic relationship to the material age in a movie entirely built by the immateriality of digital technologies.

In reading Martin Scorsese's *Hugo*, Joshua Clover sees a nostalgically reassuring allegory for labor in the age of digital cinema, wherein increasingly we have a workforce whose jobs are replaced through technological innovation. In *Hugo*, he notes, everybody is trying to find their place, their function within a larger mechanism (i.e., their job). The emphasis on machines in the movie such as the clocks and the toy automaton is ironic, since

“automation is what replaces living labor, increasing productivity but undermining the very source of surplus value until every process is nearly perfected, nearly everybody is out of work, and the economy is in crisis.”[9]

In short, the persistent utopic notion that digital's short-term cost-cutting benefits are somehow a *solution* to harsh economic situations, rather than one key cause of it, may be precisely the root of the larger problem. Yet Hollywood's solution so far has not been to idealize a better future still to come as much as to romanticize the industrial changes of the past, to pin hopes on the idea that economic problems will work themselves out because, such nostalgic logic goes, “they always have.”

In trying to understand popular culture's peculiar relation to the past, history is thoroughly intertwined with nostalgia. This is not to say they offer the same perspective at all, but that it is practically impossible to separate one from the other in understanding how popular culture *mediates* our relationship to the past. In this sense, I argue that some iteration of postmodernism remains a viable mode of analysis in discussions of our present cinematic historical consciousness. For Fredric Jameson, the “nostalgia” mode of films has referred to the ways in which cinematic depictions of the past relied more on pop culture clichés than with understanding the contradictions and ambiguities of history. He was interested at the time he wrote in movies such as *Chinatown* (1974), with its noir-ish cinematic vision of the 1930s, and *American Graffiti* (1973)—a cliché of 1950s Baby Boomer teen culture. Both films relied on stylistic conventions of the past.



For Fredric Jameson, *American Graffiti* (1974) was a perfect example of the postmodern “nostalgia” film—a work more interested in a romanticized stylization of 1950s white Baby Boomer nostalgia than in the complex cultural and political contingencies of the actual time period.

Equally important to Jameson, however, is how the films offered an aesthetic and cultural reflection of economic changes in late capitalism, where the idea of “historical consciousness” is defined in part as an (in)attention to questions of market changes and labor practices which create a context for images too often de-rooted from their historical origins in the postmodern age. Such cinematic visions of history—both old films still circulating, as well as contemporary depictions of the past—are undoubtedly affectively rich (meaning, they possess the potential to provoke any number of possible responses from the viewer). But these same images are inherently meaningless as representations of the past—simulacra, pastiche—without the various contexts that might create historical consciousness.

On their own, *Hugo* and *The Artist* fail to maintain a coherent critique beyond the passive Hollywood endorsement of capitalism typical of most mass-marketed films—an ideological muddle directly extending from their reactive sense of history as pastiche (here, Jameson’s distinction from the older form of parody is important, which possessed a political urgency he sees lacking in the neutrality of pastiche).

At the risk of misunderstanding, it’s also important to acknowledge how we still have access to “history”—in spite of the nostalgia mode—through enough time, research and *labor*. As a film historian myself, I certainly believe in this ideal. But it’s equally true that *such intensive work is very rarely done in a moment of popular culture when personal interpretations of old films become equated with studying film history*. This is something, for example, that my previous work on such de-rooted fan defenses of *Song of the South* sought to demonstrate.[10] Criticisms of Jameson’s notion of pastiche have all argued that individual agency still allows for an engagement with history in spite of the de-historicizing pastiche of the nostalgia image.[11]

Richard Dyer, for instance, insists that “pastiche allows us to feel the historicity of our feelings,” through acknowledging the felt presence of the past, through the juxtaposition of the knowing imitation (the pastiche) alongside the original text being imitated.[12] In this regard, Dyer might argue that *The Artist* still creates an opening to understand film history by recognizing the difference between its own present pastiche and the original era of late silent film techniques it perfectly imitates. This reading indicates a perfectly legitimate possibility, and yet it privileges an ideal, active spectator in a consumer culture that too often thrives on passivity and inattention. And going forward, such nostalgic mythologies as in *The Artist* and *Hugo* can *over time* too easily take on a life of their own. In understanding how history is



My earlier research on *Song of the South* fans (and subsequent reactions to the book) raised deeply disturbing questions about general audiences’ ability to engage with the messy and complex contradictions in history—disturbing questions that I naively tried to navigate in a last gasp of the utopic impulses of our “participatory” culture. *Song of the South*, a racist depiction of the Plantation-era South, has been revised by some today to be a warm, reassuring vision of racial utopia without any grounding in historical fact (either the time period depicted, or the time in which it was made). Too often, audiences conflate personal interpretations of old movies with actually doing historical research—a perfect symptom of a lack of historical consciousness in our postmodern age.

thus (not) “represented” in commercial cinema, this use of the word “nostalgia” (as opposed to more reflexive works, such as *Sunset Boulevard* [1951] that both highlight and criticize nostalgic impulses) seems appropriate to articulating a past that often is shaped, distorted, ignored and even replaced, by the prejudices and arrogance of present ideologies.

I argue that both stylistic iterations of postmodern pastiche in *Hugo* and *The Artist* nostalgically re-imagine an era before the sound transition as a metaphor for the shift from analog to digital technologies. Nostalgia for film in the age of digital cinema must be considered, at least in part, as an attempt (conscious or otherwise) to hide those destructive capitalistic tendencies underlining the digital transition within reassuring narratives of individual perseverance, industry tradition and technological inevitability. As a means to easing the transition from one period to the next, they look back to the last instance of truly profound economic and aesthetic change in the movie industry as the result of technological innovation. The transition in the 1920s was about more than just adding “talking” to otherwise silent images. The painstaking incorporation of dialogue, music and sound effects had a profound impact on what kind of cinematic stories could be told, how they could be told, by whom, and *to whom*. Sound radically changed filmmaking far more than subsequent experiments in color, widescreen, 3D and so forth.



The stunning success of so many 3D digital movies between 2009 and 2011 (including champ *Avatar*) had less to do with turning 3D into a theatrical mainstay and was more about the hugely successful push to force movie theatres to convert to digital projection.

And, yet, so what? What does that historical parallel between silent and digital cinema ultimately mean, ideologically? “Beyond their meta-cinematic nostalgia,” Clover writes, both *Hugo* and *The Artist* “speak to something larger. *Except they don’t speak, and that is the point.*”[13] While it’s seductive to imagine the present fascination with nostalgia for film history as one last rallying cry for the dying medium of celluloid, such a melancholic haze conceals far more than it illuminates. For example, *Hugo* was part of the prominent wave of Digital 3D movies released between 2009-2011 (including box-office champ, *Avatar*) which existed in large measure to simply force the market-wide conversion from 35mm projectors to Digital Cinema Packages (DCP), since none of these often highly lucrative titles could be screened on film. This was an extremely expensive undertaking for movie theatres, whose longer-term financial costs are cloudy at best—especially for independent and art cinemas. In addition, questions remain regarding maintenance, obsolescence, and the larger labor force.[14] In short, we should be mindful of how deeper economic problems are ignored, or worse, naturalized, in the present through these de-rooted fantasies. Such films envision a past where technological change is always inevitable, always incorporated irrespective of market forces, and always overcome through the power of individual perseverance.

Archaeologies of the future

“It was like a new kind of magic. I asked the Lumière brothers to sell me a camera, but they refused. You see they were convinced that movies were only a passing fad and they saw no future in it, or so they said.”

—Georges Méliès (Ben Kingsley), *Hugo* (2011)

In *Hugo*, looking back on the early days of his filmmaking career, Méliès (played by Kingsley), humorously noted during a particularly nostalgic flashback, that the Lumière Brothers, essentially the inventors of cinema, “were convinced that movies were only a passing fad and they saw no future in it.” It’s a not-so-subtle reference to one of early cinema’s great historical ironies, referred to by cinephiles throughout the decades. “The cinema is an invention without a future,” Louis Lumière supposedly declared at the dawn



The Lumière Brothers famously declared that cinema was “an invention without a future,” which becomes re-appropriated in *Hugo* to suggest we cannot yet imagine what the future of digital/3D cinema will present us. Ironically though, there is an active resistance to imagining the future in favor of a reassuringly nostalgic look back—as capitalism’s greatest strength is shutting down the potential futures of possible alternatives.

of movie history. The historical parallel in *Hugo*, meanwhile, is no doubt partially a wink to the future of movies in the digital age. It implies that if film survived, and even thrived, in the 20th Century, then certainly digital cinema (in whatever form) will thrive in the 21st. The anachronism, though, is readily apparent in this film’s own unapologetic nostalgia. In many ways, *Hugo* is much more about understanding the present developments (digital cinematography and 3D exhibition) in the film industry through past future(s)—the then-unimaginable potential of early cinema which even Lumière couldn’t see—than about actually imagining the still unrealized futures of digital cinema. Indeed, for all the utopic industrial rhetoric about the imagined promises of technological innovation, discourses about digital cinema are rarely really about the future, just as retro impulses of postmodernism are partially about shutting off future alternatives to capitalism.

Jameson’s discussion of these temporal contradictions and anachronisms in postmodern depictions of the past were focused in particular on the “nostalgia film,” which was less about personal usages of the term and more about a particularly stylized view of the past with little interest in historical documentation. In this scenario, the word “nostalgia” is perhaps misleading but nonetheless apt, since it is above all else more about the present’s romanticized fantasy of the past than about its unresolvable uncertainties. If this idea of postmodern pastiche seems itself dated, one needn’t look any further than *The Artist*.



The Artist is typical postmodern pastiche—the 1920s cinema (aspect ratio, no dialogue, Black and White look, etc) is the decade, and vice versa. There are certainly some clever moments (“Please, Be Silent”) but they don’t have any particular historical significance. And they are too often likely to be lost on audiences that are generally passive, uninformed or, at best, inattentive — taking *The Artist* entirely at face value.

The film concerns the initial failure of a major movie star from the silent era, George Valentin (Jean Dujardin), to survive the transition to sound, finding himself quickly left behind by both an industry and a love interest, rising starlet Peppy Miller (Berenice Bejo), who have made the adjustment to a fundamentally new type of cinematic storytelling. A textbook instance of Hollywood pastiche in its representation of the silent era, the film reproduces the style of a black and white movie as a substitute for history. Hazanavicius wanted to make a silent film in part because of its inherent focus on the image as the primary means of storytelling.[15]

As a particularly acute instance of postmodern nostalgia, *The Artist* makes no distinction between silent black and white movies from the late 1920s and the decade itself—in other words, *the image was the decade, and vice versa*. Moreover, the use of actual Hollywood soundstages from the 1920s during production gave the film an added “realism,” noted cast member John Goodman in a making-of video—an ironic choice of words (as in, sites of cinematically-staged authenticity are equated with historical authenticity). In both cases, there’s no (historical) space outside that cinematic surface. Yet simply defining *The Artist* as pastiche in the digital age is perhaps the easiest, and certainly less urgent, half of the question. The film thoroughly de-historicizes the very same moment in time that it so lovingly mimics. Its deeper mythology involves a fantasy of triumphant individualism in the face



A broken man in the wake of the end of silent cinema, George Valentin (Jean Dujardin) in *The Artist* suggests another narrative of individualism — where people are victims of circumstances beyond their control, and have only themselves to blame for not challenging themselves for the better.



The Artist's sound final sequence features George speaking to us with a heavy French accent, with the perhaps unintended irony of reminding more savvy viewers that cinema was once a truly global language, and that the introduction of sound restricted creative possibilities to the movies as much as it presented them.

of uncontrollable economic hardships—while Valentin reinvents himself and survives the transition, many real-life Valentins in the movie industry (on and off-screen) did not. Clover notes the irony of *The Artist's* depiction of the end of the 1920s:

“Valentin, fictional star of the late silent age, is left behind by the advent of talkies—which in a fudged timeline falls on the day of the market collapse inaugurating the Great Depression. He is doubly displaced: by industrial advances, and by the collapse of the labor market. [. . .] Technology and the market have left him behind.”[16]

The absence of history, meanwhile, is directly tied to its representation of labor. *The Artist* fails to *say* anything on the matter—in more ways than one—other than to offer the easy solution in the end. Then Valentin magically finds a new talent, dancing, and a thus a new job to pull himself out of his own great depression. Certainly, there are *potentially* sly historical jokes. At the end, Valentin finally speaks with a heavy French accent, humorously highlighting how spoken words in movies weren't relevant yet—that more importantly, silent cinema in that regard was a truly global language. The irony is profoundly and unintentionally sad, reiterating how English became the dominant language of the 20th Century in part due to Hollywood's post-world war domination of the marketplace, while also at times marginalizing non-English audiences and filmmakers.

Accumulatively, technological innovation—the long march from a manufacturing to information-based economy—has not created more jobs than it's eliminated. It has not aided workers in production as much as it has made their physical labor increasingly obsolete. In this regard, many economic aspects of digital cinema are no different. “Newer technologies, newer automatons, promise some sort of restoration that doesn't come,” Clover writes, “how could it, when these very same developments are the instruments of destruction?”[17] And the negative impact of the sound transition as depicted in *The Artist* wasn't simply confined to a few high-profile movie stars. “In the 1920s,” Bruce Goldstein notes,

“the smallest theatres couldn't afford the cost of wiring for sound, and many of them went under—particularly after the market crashed in 1929.” [18]

Goldstein's larger point here is to use the early sound transition to highlight the impact of the digital age on the economics of theatrical exhibition today, a lurking historical parallel worth investigating further.



One of the untold stories of the sound transition in the late 1920s is how many theatres were forced to close as a result of not being able to afford the upgrade in equipment — an eerie parallel to a similar impact in the age of Digital Cinema Packages.

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DCP and the digital divide

There are any number of areas where digital innovation raises long-term economic questions—if not for the studios necessarily. With the exception of online distribution (which involves minimal costs), the savings in going digital generally have not “trickled down” to paying moviegoers, film archives, animation/VFX workers, the free labor of participatory culture, and so on. Upstart filmmakers benefit in the short-term, but also find themselves in an increasingly crowded late capitalist marketplace that inversely puts a decreasing economic value on their labor. Narratives of inevitability, such as in *The Artist*, seek to naturalize the shock of a sudden change which is quietly driven by determined but arbitrary market forces. Writing on the “onrush to digital conversion” over the last few years, James Quandt has pointed out that

“late capitalism has taught us that inevitability is often a disguise or excuse for commercial coercion, and there is a whiff of intimidation in the accompanying terminology (e.g., ‘digital complaint’).”[19]

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This coercion, moreover, had led to a deepening digital divide between those with the resources to profit from the transition and those who many not even have the resources to survive.

On that note, I’d like to explore the recent conversion to digital theatrical exhibition which has swept through movie theatres in just the last few years at a time of both digital distribution and, with it, often more solitary viewings. It’s an all the more appropriate site for analysis, given that both *The Artist* and *Hugo*’s respective nostalgia for film history also implicitly promotes nostalgia for the imagined good old days of theatrical movie-going. In 2002, six major Hollywood studios collaborated to standardize the technology underlining the future of digital projection. The result was the “Digital Cinema Initiatives” (DCI), intended

“to ensure the quality, compatibility, and security of the digital exhibition of their films.”[20]

This eventually appeared in the form of the Digital Cinema Package (DCP)—where several bulky film canisters are now replaced with large disks containing all the information needed to screen the movie, saved as encrypted files, inserted directly to the digital projector.



A Digital Cinema Package (DCP) — a large jump drive that contains all the information needed for screening the latest Hollywood blockbuster. While offering a cleaner, more resilient, picture to audiences, it also has had a negative impact economically on labor in relation to shipping, screening and maintenance costs — and one whose long-term costs remain to be seen.

Going forward, movie theatres would need the compatible hardware in place to screen the latest digital titles. There's certainly a historical echo here from the early days of cinema. The move to make 35mm film production and exhibition technology the industry standard co-existed with the patent wars that grew out of this standardization. Creating *one* universal technology allowed the powers that be to control the market going forward. Moreover, it is this industrial history that directly intertwines with the nostalgic mythologies in *Hugo*.

The industry-wide push by the studios for digital projection was far more economic in intention than aesthetic. While popular discourses around this new innovation visibly promoted the idea of a flawless digital image with no tears, scratches or other forms of degradation over time, the real reasons involved combatting piracy and saving money on distribution costs that did not translate to savings for anyone else—neither for paying customers nor for the low-end movie theatres without the resources of the major multiplexes. “The shift to digital promised a tremendous savings for the studios,” writes Lisa Dombrowski,

“*IHS Screen Digest* estimates digital will produce an 80 per cent savings on direct releasing costs [. . .] (a digital print costs between \$100 and \$300, while a 35mm print averages \$1200 to \$2000 more).”[21]

The novelty of Digital 3D exhibition, so central to *Hugo*'s promotion and critical reception, was largely a means to force the issue of DCP conversion. Criticisms of 3D, especially post-conversion jobs, eventually crept in as increasingly bad movies (2010's *Clash of the Titans*) further exploited the gimmick. It seemed a cheap excuse to charge higher ticket prices, and a strain on the eyes to watch. Yet these valid critiques were a distraction from the real issue.



The backlash to 3D digital exhibition was swift and strong, as audiences quickly began to reject the inflated prices and considerable eye-strain and headache inducement, particularly related to cheap post-conversion jobs like *Clash of the Titans*, which was not originally shot in 3D.

In retrospect, as Thomas Elsaesser notes,

“once the technology has been installed and amortized via a season of successful 3D films, it does not matter whether 3D is a big screen mainstay, or a niche product.”[22]

In just a couple of years, digital projection for both 2D and 3D movies became the industry standard—thanks in part to but certainly not dependent upon either the passing novelty or future sustainability of the latter.

That conversion has come at a great cost—especially for independent theatres, art cinemas and drive-ins that could not afford the transition (this was also, of course, part of the point, as both studios and major theatre chains benefit from driving out competition). “Virtual Print Fee” (VPF) financing, where third party loans were used to offset some of the costs for digital upgrading,

“was designed by the major studios to assist their primary exhibition partners—first-run commercial multiplexes that debut studio features in rapid succession.”[23]

Even then, the VPF loan system does not take into account the long-term maintenance and upgrade costs of digital projectors:

“the ultimate pricetag of digital equipment is hidden to exhibitors right now. Little expenses add up. [. . .] And *digital is notoriously temperamental*.”[24]

Chain multiplexes could afford upgrades since they could disperse costs through financing plans and the income of thousands of screens. In contrast, first-run-dependent commercial single or dual screen cinemas often faced an impossible burden which led to many shutting down, especially as access to 35mm prints became increasingly rare on their own, even as some art cinemas found creative ways to survive.[25]

What the age of digital cinema has brought to theatrical exhibition is further economic disparity—and rising costs for consumers and disadvantaged competitors despite supposed financial savings such innovations brought. As Dombrowski writes,

“Non-DCI-compliant forms of digital cinema—known as ‘e-cinema’—are much more common in art houses than [the



Smaller theatres, such as this one in Madison, Wisconsin, are shutting down right and left as they cannot afford to upgrade to digital projectors.



One unconsidered victim of the digital transition in exhibition practices has been local drive-in movie theatres, such as this one in Kenosha, Wisconsin, which will soon close permanently. The situation was so intense for awhile that Honda sponsored “Project Drive-In” during the summer of 2013—a contest designed to help the lucky few afford the new projectors.

compliant] d-cinema, creating a digital divide between those theatres that are DCI-complaint and able to screen films from all distributors, and those that are not.”[26]

In discussing the economic impact of DCP on independent and art cinemas, Dombrowski is understandably ambivalent, given that some have managed to survive on low cost alternatives, such as screening Blu-Ray discs, while also allowing indie filmmakers to screen movies born digital without the financial burdens of converting them to 35mm prints or compliant DC packages. Still, her closing question is worth repeating:

“If d-cinema [DCI-complaint] does become uniform across the entire motion picture industry, will it lower costs after the end of VPFs place the major studios and independents, the multiplexes and the art houses on more equal footing, or will the majors’ oligopolistic control continue to dictate terms of the marketplace?”[27]

The long-term uncertainty of this profound inequality, of a “digital divide” that exists beyond just theatre economics, is troubling. While a benefit of DCP might be “freeing staff to spend more time with customers and less time in the projection booth,” it seems more likely to leave that staff unemployed, perceived as a wasteful redundancy in a steadily shrinking labor force. They will end up just like the union projectionist whose job once upon a time was to splice together the feature film celluloid print with the trailers shipped separately (all the material that now comes pre-loaded on a DCP drive). As Clover’s insightful reading of *The Artist* and *Hugo* implied, the hidden truth behind the euphemism of “saving money” is that we are really talking about cutting people’s jobs—but bottom lines don’t have a face. Studios and other powerful businesses in the film industry are not looking to hire more workers in the wake of digital innovations that might save money. Even in filmmaking communities inside and outside Hollywood, a conservative myth is frustratingly persistent that lowering costs will somehow improve our collective financial future, rather than continue to put a strain on our overall economic well-being.

Hugo and the all-fantasy genre

“Other filmmakers rely less upon special effects and fantasy; there are scores of directors like Woody Allen, Martin Scorsese, Robert Altman, Stephen Frears, John Sayles, Paul Schrader, and Mike Leigh, who make films about more or less realistically conceived characters in more or less realistic settings. There is no reason for the digital fantasies of sci-fi to drive an industry that, since the sci-fi blockbusters of the late 1970s and early ’80s, has become increasingly diverse in terms of narrative content. *Indeed, the danger is that an all-digital cinema might very well lead to an all-fantasy cinema—to essentially one genre.*”

—John Belton, “Digital Cinema: A False Revolution?”[28]

Over a decade ago, responding to George Lucas’ proclamations of an all-digital future, Belton wrote a teachable article on the long-term implications of the transition from celluloid to digital cinema. Belton focused on the long-term industrial realities and limitations regarding the new medium’s ambitions, as well as on the fundamental ways in which digital cinema often aspires to do little more creatively than simply emulate film’s existing theatrical experience—hence, as he coined, “a false revolution.” For Belton, the creative temptation existed for some filmmakers to explore more fantastical plots and settings. In this regard, Scorsese’s subsequent *Hugo* emerges as the most perfectly realized dream or nightmare to arise from Belton’s observation about the move to an “all-fantasy genre.” In ways both more obvious but also more subtle than *The Artist*, *Hugo* is a postmodern nostalgia film which conflates history with cinematic mediations of that past. The movie’s cinephiliac references to Lumière and Jean Renoir, as Elsaesser wrote, balances

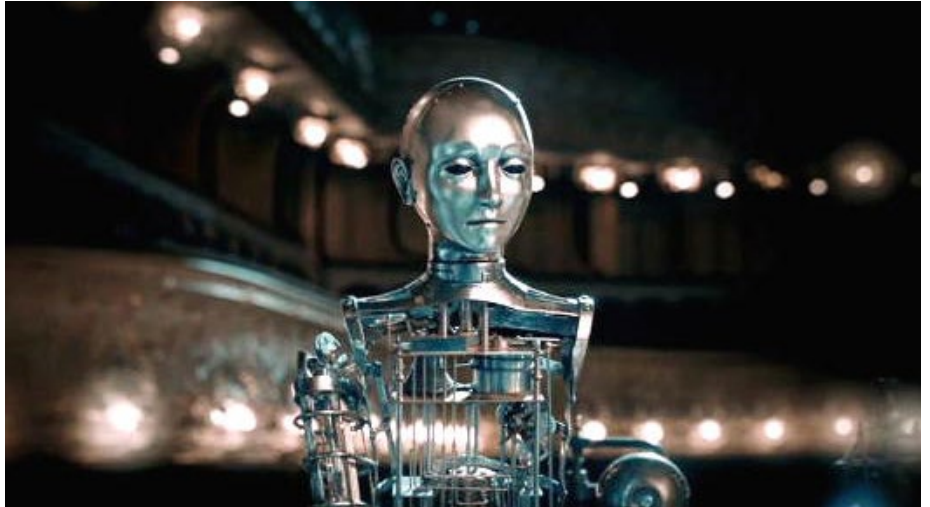
“the director’s homage to (French) film culture and cinephilia with a somewhat more ambiguous appropriation of Méliès’ genius as the ‘precursor’ of Hollywood’s 3D revival. [. . .] [I]t also hints at a paradigm shift in the way we might come to look at 3D itself [. . .] *fitting for an age when cinema (and television) history is likely to become the only history our culture has an affective memory of.*”[29]

Like its auteurist overseer, *Hugo* is a champion both of shooting on digital video and of the literal and symbolic preservation of old films (with slightly less attention to film history). It is also an all-out digital 3D spectacle that, as Belton feared, exists in large measure to show off the legendary *auteur*’s skills with a new array of digital tools. Scorsese’s status as canonical filmmaker, in return, adds greater artistic credibility to the all-pervasive but much critically maligned fantasy film genre, as well as to the highlighted novelty of 3D filmmaking. Employing the latest innovations in high-definition cinematography (ARRI Alexa), visual/sound effects work, and 3D exhibition, *Hugo* presents viewers with an impossibly perfect vision of 1930s Paris—a digital landscape more akin to an idealized painting than its faithful (and mechanical) reproduction as a photograph.



Hugo presents to us an impossibly beautiful vision of Paris in the 1930s — a nostalgic idealization more evocative of a digital painting than a faithfully reproduced photograph.

Within that digital vision is a larger romance with the legacy of the machine age—for a pre-digital era of materiality when we could physically see how things worked, for that glorious glimpse of modernity's potential, which came and went somewhere between 1931 and 2011. Thus, what's striking in *Hugo* are not simply the lush 3D visuals, but the consistent fetishization of machines and their moving parts—clocks, trains, wind-up toys, hand-cranked movie projectors, and of course the cherished automaton, which represents the last material link between a boy and his deceased father.



The Automaton represents *Hugo*'s ultimate nostalgia for the machine age — even though ironically its movement is generated entirely by profilmic and postfilmic computers.

This plot element refers to real automata from the 19th Century—elaborate robotic dolls that, with the precise timing of various weights, gears and other mechanisms, came to life by mimicking basic tasks such as writing words or playing music. The movement of the actual automaton in *Hugo* was really generated by both pro-filmic and post-production computer work, giving only the visual *effect* of pre-digital mechanization. It's a sad irony worth pursuing. The robot in *Hugo*, a nostalgic throwback to the possibilities of the machine age, was a careful computer effect, and the elaborate artwork created by this particular automaton (a drawn “still” from Méliès' *Voyage to the Moon*)—far surpassed the actual capacities of those devices historically.



The meticulous drawing of a still from *Voyage to the Moon* (1902) far

surpassed the abilities of a real automaton.

Hugo's tenuous relationship to anything resembling historical accuracy is easy to overlook. After all, the brilliance of *Hugo*'s digital homage to Méliès is based partially on the magical idea that he was the first filmmaker to understand cinema's capacity to deceive the eye (jump cuts). Appeals to historical fidelity seem even more irrelevant given the movie's own narrative ambitions as little more than a fantastical kid's fable. However, a key point of Hollywood's embrace of fantasy ideologically in the digital age has been to close off space for criticism, a goal further intensified here with what could reasonably be deemed "only" a children's movie.[30] In place of ideological critique, in place of history, is the story of undying love in *Hugo* that transcends space, time and technology—a generational nostalgia involving a father and son.



Hugo's nostalgic vision is two-fold — a love of early film preservation efforts from the 1930s, and a love of the days of silent cinema. In real life, though, Méliès did not utilize color sets since everything was shot in B&W anyway.

What anchors *Hugo* for its most ardent cinephiliac fans is its deeply nostalgic affection for early cinema, for the era of innocent wonder that the days of Méliès and Lumière suggest. *Hugo* makes literal an otherwise symbolic connection between the "cinema of attractions" at the end of the 19th Century and an "all-fantasy cinema" at the end of the 20th (though it's easy to be skeptical of this historical parallel). Scholars commonly use this to add historical perspective on the larger technological shift in cinema at the dawn of the digital age.[31] It's unsurprising that upon *Hugo*'s release many cinephiles, historians and other film buffs delighted[32] in a digital spectacle which embraced 3D technology as a way to recreate landmark cinematic images—both literally (using restored Méliès prints in the new format) and symbolically (such as the many references to the Lumières' *L'arrivée d'un Train en Gare de La Ciotat* ["The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station"]).

The reference to *L'arrivée d'un Train*, of course, also included the infamous historical anecdote of naïve spectators who supposedly fled in terror at the cinematic sight of an oncoming train.



Certainly, one of *Hugo*'s most clever cinephiliac gags are the repeated references to one of early cinema's most iconic films — the Lumière Brothers' *L'arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat* (1895).

Yet before sliding too far into *Hugo*'s nostalgic fantasy of movie history, the continued deployment of that particular historical anecdote itself should give pause. One of Tom Gunning's key insights into early cinema history was to debunk the persistent claim that continues in some circles to this day that the earliest movie spectators were too dumb to distinguish silent, black and white moving images of a train from the presence of a real one, and thus panicked. [33] *Hugo*, meanwhile, re-mystifies that history more so than challenges it—especially by

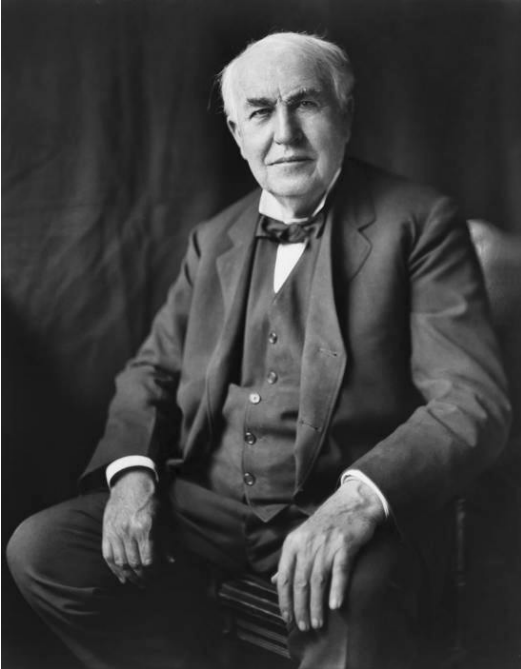
- altering that movie so that—when shown in 3D exhibition—the image of the train *really* does seem to come out of the screen,
- depicting easily frightened past audiences (both in 1895 and 1931), and
- celebrating cinema's general affective potential to excess through its embrace of 3D aesthetics.



Ironically, *Hugo*'s playful 3D reference to one of early cinema's most persistent myths—that of the terrified spectator that confused a movie of an

oncoming train with the presence of a real one — ends up re-mystifying that story instead of challenging it — another nostalgic (and condescending) vision of a simpler time.

The curious *reimagining* of early cinema history is not nearly as pressing as *Hugo*'s main structuring absence: the emergent economic histories around Méliès' rise and fall. While *Hugo* is reasonably accurate in its presentation of the film pioneer's life, it obscures at least one important detail—his downfall wasn't WWI, which brought different collective moods and logistical demands. What wiped Méliès out even *before* the outbreak of war was continually losing distribution battles with more powerful "pioneers" like Pathe Co. and Thomas Edison[34] and even his own brother, Gaston.[35] Méliès battled the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC), the sheer output of others' mass production as a result of standardized film technology,[36] and unscrupulous competition who pirated copies of his films for U.S. distribution without compensation.[37] *Hugo* overlooks the fact that Méliès' waning popularity was as much due to questionable market practices as to the fading interest in his product's novelty.



The concealed economic histories of *Hugo* gets us to the heart of the matter. Méliès did not go out of business due to changing sensibilities after WWI. In fact, he'd already gone under before the outbreak of war. What cost him was the unscrupulous behavior of more powerful competitors, such as the so-called "Father of Cinema," Thomas Edison, who in addition to winning copyright and distribution battles with his team of top-notch lawyers also bootlegged the French filmmaker's work for U.S. distribution without compensation.

In this regard, both *The Artist* and *Hugo* follow in a long line of films about technical innovation in Hollywood such as *Stand In* or *Singing in the Rain*. These films reduce complex industrial questions to the usual Hollywood whims of random fate and individualism. Their characters are mere victims of unfortunate circumstances beyond anyone's control (war, depression, market shifts, evolving sensibilities, changing technology), instead of encountering the very real institutional and legal contexts that go unacknowledged. To be clear, my interest is not historical fidelity as much as how film histories are selectively re-told through pastiche, and what's at stake in the nostalgic *fantasy* (in both senses of the word) presented in its place. The historical carelessness befits an industry that has no interest in criticizing ambitions for global market domination. For Hollywood to criticize Edison would mean criticizing itself, particularly today, as studios push for digital exhibition to squeeze out piracy and independent competitors, and embrace "transmedia storytelling" (books, records, games, etc.) to maximize the corporate imperative and market reach of horizontal integration. Certainly, complicated legal and industrial histories are not the ideal subject matter for a kid's film, but the point is precisely that Hollywood hides ideologically behind the seeming "innocence" of such fantastical indulgences all the time. So, when looking at a kid's movie like *Hugo*—enveloped in the ideological safety net of a particular market demographic, in cinephiliac nostalgia and in *auteurist* prestige—we aren't meant to notice the dialectical history being erased.

This is the core of postmodern *pastiche*—which is not merely the constant re-appropriation of random cinematic styles for their own sake, but the deliberate *de-politicizing of the economic histories they avoid*. At best, as with *The Artist*'s reenactment of the 1929 market crash, technological and cultural change is presented as an inevitable and thus unopposable force, something that just "is," which no one can do much about except to reject or embrace—like the recent push to digital projection in theatrical exhibition.



The ultimate Capitalist myth at the heart of *The Artist* — the 1929 stock market crash was a random, unforeseen disaster over which no one, including Valentin, had any control over, instead of the product of excessive, irresponsible business practices which could have been addressed by collective action — not by his newfound ability to dance.

These movies passively suggest that Valentin and Méliès' respective careers are threatened due to forces beyond their control. This befits a Hollywood industry that resists creative and economic opposition and that wishes to imagine “no future” of opposition or alternatives. Hollywood’s “seamless” style and “natural” ideologies are designed to survive precisely by going unquestioned and even unnoticed. In the most cynical (though not only) conception of nostalgia’s value, it’s not the lack of historical accuracy—it’s the absence of a material opposition to the image necessary to defining “historical consciousness,” which a more sustained attention to industry and audience histories, as just two examples, might provide.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes

1. Gilbert, "The Death of Film and the Hollywood Response," *Senses of Cinema* 62 (March 2012), <http://sensesofcinema.com/2012/feature-articles/the-death-of-film-and-the-hollywood-response>. [return to page 1]
2. My emphasis. Clover, "Marx and Coca-Cola: Enjoy the Silents," *Film Quarterly* (Summer 2012), p. 7.
3. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001). In *The Virtual Life of Film*, meanwhile, D.N. Rodowick speculated that "the idea of cinema persists in the term 'digital cinema' as a way of easing the transition to a different [technological] world" beyond celluloid— *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 177.
4. Gilbert, <http://sensesofcinema.com/2012/feature-articles/the-death-of-film-and-the-hollywood-response/>.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. This discussion of audience labor owes much to the neglected theories of Dallas Smythe on what he long ago called the "audience commodity"— Smythe, "On the audience commodity and its work," *Dependency Road: Communications, Capitalism, Consciousness, and Canada* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1981), pp. 22–51.
8. Sperb, "I'll (Always) Be Back / Virtual Performance and Post-Human Labor in the Age of Digital Cinema," *Culture, Theory and Critique* 53.3 (Fall 2012), pp. 383-397.
9. Clover, "Marx and Coca-Cola: Enjoy the Silents," p. 7.
10. Sperb, *Disney's Most Notorious Film: Race, Convergence and the Hidden Histories of Song of the South* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2012).
11. See, for example, Christine Sprengler, *Screening Nostalgia: Populuxe Props and Technicolor Aesthetics in Contemporary American Film* (New York: Berghahn, 2009); Linda Hutcheon, "The Politics of Postmodernism: Parody and History," *Cultural Critique* 5 (Winter 1986-1987), p. 179-207; and, Richard Dyer, *Pastiche* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

12. Dyer, p. 130.
13. My emphasis. Clover, "Marx and Coca-Cola: Enjoy the Silents," p. 7.
14. For more on the conversion to DCP, see: Dombrowski, "Not If, But When and How: Digital Comes to the American Art House," *Film History* 24 (2012), pp. 235-248; Rapfogel, Jared, et. al. "From 35mm to DCP." *Cineaste* (Spring 2012), pp. 32-42; Elsaesser, "The 'Return' of 3D: On Some of the Logics and Genealogies of the Image in the Twenty-First Century," *Critical Inquiry* 39 (Winter 2013), pp. 217-246; and, John Belton, "Digital 3D Cinema: Digital Cinema's Missing Novelty Phase," *Film History* 24 (2012), pp. 187-195.
15. This use of silent images to tell its story echoes what Christine Sprengler, drawing on Marc La Sœur, referred to as a "deliberate archaism," which intentionally "strive[s] to recreate not only the look and feel of the period [*mise-en-scene*] in question but also the [formal] appearance of art from that distant time" (p. 86).
16. Clover, "Marx and Coca-Cola: Enjoy the Silents," p. 6.
17. Clover, "Marx and Coca-Cola: Enjoy the Silents," p. 7.
18. As qtd in: Rapfogel, p. 38.
19. As qtd in: Rapfogel, p. 40. [[return to page 2](#)]
20. Dombrowski, p. 236.
21. Dombrowski, p. 236.
22. Elsaesser, p. 222.
23. Dombrowski, p. 238.
24. My emphasis. Gendy Alimurung, "Movie Studios are forcing Hollywood to Abandon 35mm Film, But the Consequences of Going Digital are Vast, and Troubling," <http://www.laweekly.com/2012-04-12/film-tv/35-mm-film-digital-Hollywood/full/>
25. See Dombrowski's discussion of E-Cinema vs. D-Cinema.
26. Dombrowski, p. 237.
27. Dombrowski, p. 246.
28. My emphasis. Belton, "Digital Cinema: A False Revolution?" *October* 100 (Spring 2002), pp. 105-106.
29. My emphasis. Elsaesser, pp. 217-218.
30. This is a similar point to what Sean Cubitt has previously argued about digital cinema's ideologies in *The Cinema Effect* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press,

2005).

31. In particular, many scholars have (heavily) modified Tom Gunning's work on early "attractions" for era of the CGI blockbuster. While some fear a descent into VFX spectacles with little interest in storytelling, others held out hope that such developments today would evoke cinema's early pre-narrative fascination with spectacle for its own sake, as Gunning first argued.

32. For example, in his five-star cinephiliac review of the film, Roger Ebert wrote that

"Scorsese uses 3-D here as it should be used, not as a gimmick but as an enhancement of the total effect. Notice in particular his re-creation of the famous little film *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (1897), by the Lumiere brothers. You've probably heard its legend: As a train rushes toward the camera, the audience panics and struggles to get out of its way. That is a shot which demonstrates the proper use of 3-D, which the Lumieres might have used had it been available."

— "Hugo," RobertEbert.com (21 Nov. 2011), accessed: 14 June 2014.
<http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/hugo-2011>

Slightly more level-headed, scholar Dan North wrote that Scorsese's

"the maker of some astonishingly powerful, influential and innovative work, and his love of cinema history, which drives him to emulate his favourites rather than attempt to honour them with blandly imitative homages, is always infectious."

—"Digesting *Hugo*," *Spectacular Attractions* (13 April 2012), accessed: 14 June 2014.
<http://drnorth.wordpress.com/2012/04/13/digesting-hugo/>

33. Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," *Wide Angle* 3 (1986), pp. 56-62.

34. Edison sued Melies, among others, over copyright infringement as early as 1904: see, Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Cinema to 1907* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990), p. 402.

35. Eileen Bower, *The Transformation of Cinema, 1907-1915* (Detroit: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1991), p. 30.

36. Bower, p. 26.

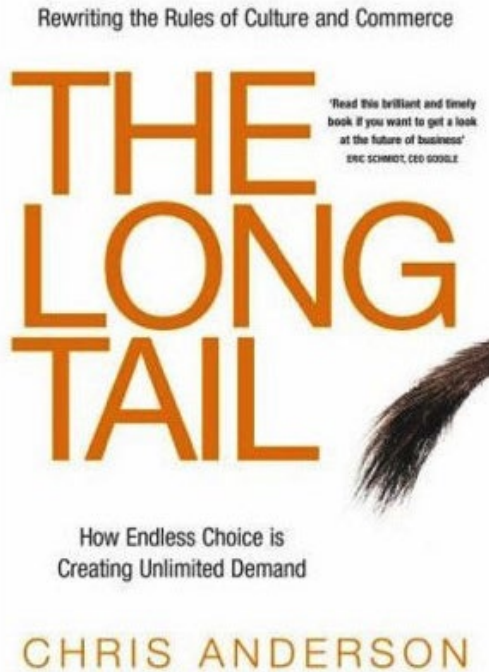
37. Musser, p. 364.



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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Chris Anderson's "Long Tail" analysis of the film business began as an article in *Wired Magazine* in 2004, and became so influential that he published a bestselling book elaboration in 2006.



YouTube and its cousins have offered the widest spectrum of accessible distribution that films have ever enjoyed.

The tail wags: Hollywood's crumbling infrastructure

by [Jonathan Eig](#)

Long ago—so long, in fact, that few alive still can recall it—there was a mighty giant who ruled in benevolence over a grateful populace. All was good in the giant's land, even in times of economic turmoil and armed conflict. The giant stood firm and the people were content. Then came a usurper. It came invisibly through the sky, with charismatic leaders who went by the menacing names of Uncle Milt and Hopalong and Lucy. And the giant, fearful for his domain, responded as best he could. He used his formidable power to literally stretch the dimensions of the world, to bring color to the colorless, to part the seas and span the globe.

What do you think? Could I sell that story to Hollywood studios today? They are constantly on the lookout for the epic battles of unreal characters. This is the age of spectacle and wonder. This is the CGI call. The way camera captures all our motions. This is the eve of the fall.

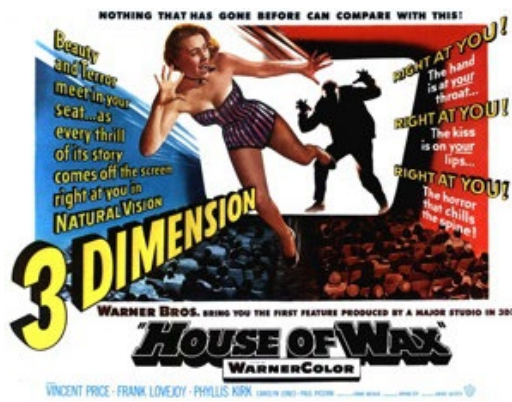
A brief historical overview

It has been ten years now since *Wired Magazine's* Chris Anderson first published his essay "The Long Tail" in which he described a new world order for filmed entertainment. With affordable avenues for distribution multiplying day by day, Anderson argued that the era of the blockbuster was over. Easier access to distribution would empower filmmakers of all styles. No longer would the deep pockets of Hollywood studios control what we could see.

It's a nice theory.

There has been much analysis already as to the accuracy of Anderson's prediction. Five years ago, writing for Reuters, Yinka Adegoke began an essay with "Far be it for us to be the umpteenth person to assail *Wired* editor Chris Anderson's much quoted and yet much maligned book, *The Long Tail* ..." [1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Harvard Business School professor Anita Elberse's recent analysis in *Blockbusters: Hit-making, Risk-taking, and the Big Business of Entertainment* suggests that though the tail Anderson foresaw may have indeed grown longer, it has also grown thinner. [2] That means there are more products available, but only a minuscule part of the population is exposed to most of them. With technology changing at such a rapid pace, it is unwise to make any bold pronouncements about what the landscape will look like ten years hence. But we can ask one very pertinent question about the last ten years: Regardless of whether the long tail is thriving or is a myth, are the movies getting better?

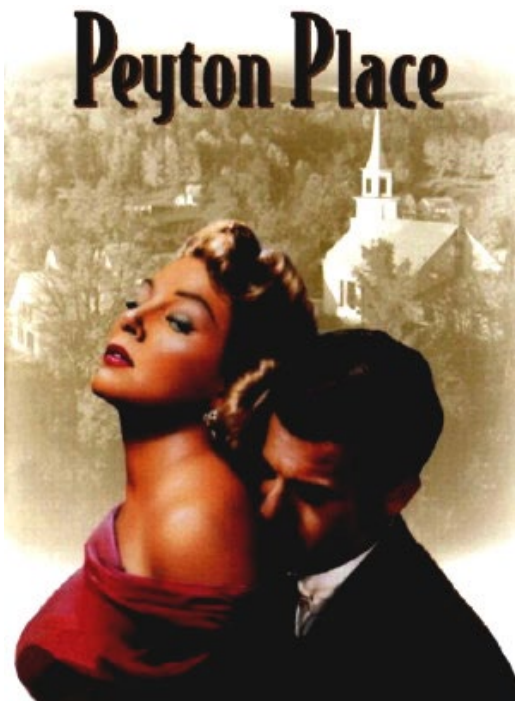
I want to look at the current state of U.S. cinema and discuss crucial cracks in infrastructure that have led to a decline in quality, and which, if left unchecked,



Mainstream producers in the 1950s tried to lure spectators to the theater with new gadgets like 3D....



... and wide screen presentations.



Producers also offered more adult subject matter.

may have disastrous consequences in the not-too-distant future.

It is useful to look back at Hollywood in the years after WWII when considering the current state of affairs. Throughout the 1920s and '30s, U.S. film had ruled the world. Of all the leading film producing nations before WWI, America was the one country that was not devastated by the Great War. Hollywood studios took advantage of that situation, and by the eve of 1939 U.S. film held dominion. The product was homogenized. Producers, more than directors or screenwriters, influenced the artistic output. The studio system may have muted individual expression, but as an economic model, the system worked magnificently. However, trouble was lurking. Despite getting a temporary reprieve during the early '40s, as soon as the war ended the U.S. Justice Department essentially declared the major studios monopolies and forced them to sell off distribution and exhibition pieces of their empires. The economic model began to crumble. At the same time, the Red Scare led to blacklisting which sucked much of the artistic vibrancy out of a frightened industry. But the big blow came from the usurper—television.

Hollywood initially laughed off the new medium, but as the '50s went on, it became increasingly obvious that television was no laughing matter for the film industry. Television set ownership increased some fiftyfold throughout the decade. People were staying home to watch their Westerns. Hollywood had to respond.

The studios responded by trying to offer the viewing public the types of experiences television could not yet duplicate. This was the era of presentational innovation—or gimmickry, depending on your particular tastes. The previous major innovation in the presentation of movies—the advent of synchronized sound in the late '20s—had come shortly after another new medium, radio, began challenging movies for audience share. In the '50s, color film became standard. Early forms of 3D were rolled out. Wide screen formats were aggressively marketed. And in terms of content, bigger and more lavish movies became common. The Production Code, which had been putting a damper on adult content in U.S. film since the early 1930s, was still in effect, but its impact was waning. Sex—and not just procreative sex between husband and wife—found an increasingly friendly home on the Hollywood screen, whether salacious (as in the case of Mark Robson's soap opera *Peyton Place*, 1957) or sophisticated (as in the case of Richard Quine's very adult romance *Strangers When We Meet*, 1960). Far from retrenching, the major studios began spending more than ever to convince the U.S. viewer to get off the sofa and come to the theater.

And it worked. At least until it didn't.

It's an oversimplification to say that U.S. filmmakers gave up on well-crafted stories and complex characters in favor of spectacle. But it is clear that the emphasis shifted. More value was placed on the spectacular, whether it was in a period piece or a musical. More emphasis was also placed on derivative work—work that was based on previously established material that offered producers a safer proposition. Representative blockbusters of the decade included *Peter Pan* (a youth-based spectacle from J.M. Barrie's stories and stage play) and *The Ten Commandments* (remade by the same man, Cecil B. DeMille who had scored a major hit with it in the silent era). As studio monopolies weakened, a new crop of independent producers, often using United Artists as a distributor, emerged. Some of their movies, like the Aldrich & Associates *The Big Knife* (directed by Robert Aldrich in 1955) and the Hill-Hecht-Lancaster production of *Sweet Smell of Success* (directed by Alexander Mackendrick and starring Burt Lancaster in 1957) seemed to enjoy turning a scathing eye toward the mainstream entertainment industry with small, well-crafted screenplays and minimal visual extravagance.



The consummate showman Cecil B. DeMille scored big with *The Ten Commandments*, both a spectacle and a remake.



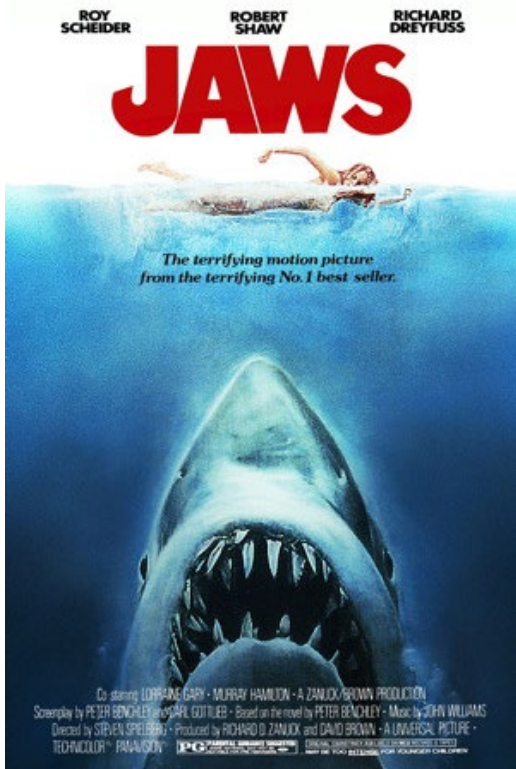
While the old Hollywood studios were relying more and more on spectacle, a new independent movement in U.S. film focused more on well-crafted adult stories.



By the late 1960s, seeds sown in the independent movement from a decade earlier began to take hold. New directors like John Casavetes, Bob Rafelson, Peter Bogdanovich, and Arthur Penn, who directed *Bonnie and Clyde*, provided a brief golden age of mainstream independent cinema in the United States.

Meanwhile, at the studio level, relatively less emphasis was placed on developing original dramas and comedies that could appeal to an adult audience. What followed was a brief period of success, and then the doldrums. The '60s. The Deadball Era in baseball. Even the Yankees weren't any good. And by almost every metric, U.S. films hit new lows as well. The overall artistic quality fell off dramatically. The period of studio neglect—of failing to develop original adult stories—caught up with the industry in a major way. Alexander Mackendrick, though only 45, was essentially done as a feature film director after *Sweet Smell of Success*, in part because he didn't have the support of a studio behind him. Robert Aldrich would align himself more closely with the studios and make a series of successful movies after *The Big Knife*, but by the mid-1960s, when he was not yet 50, his career as a director of note was also largely over. Things got so bad in the early part of the '60s that film critic Danny Peary, when putting together his popular collection of "Alternate Oscars," had to simply leave 1963 as a void, concluding there were no "best pictures" that year. For 1965, he had to turn to a Polish director filming in England (Roman Polanski's *Repulsion*) to find the only movie he considered worthy.[3]

Things began to turn around late in the decade. Economic disaster is a great motivator and the creaky old studios were desperate to find a way to speak to the new generation. They were open to experiment. Mark Harris' excellent book —*Pictures at the Revolution*—chronicles the 1967 Oscar race for Best Picture in which two stodgy old school relics met up with two new and exciting pictures. [4] History would rank the new-school films, *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Graduate*, far higher than the old-school entries, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* and *Dr. Doolittle*. This seemed to usher in an era of intriguing new movies throughout the late '60s and early '70s. Then came the dual punch of *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977), and the blockbuster era was born. You might say that over the last forty years, a battle has raged on in the U.S. film landscape between those blockbusters and the smaller, more indie-oriented style of film. If Chris Anderson was correct in 2004, then we should be seeing the smaller films flourishing. They can't be expected to outdraw studio-backed blockbusters, but could more accessible avenues of distribution, combined with more affordable methods of production, actually allow for more diverse types of films to play a major role in the industry? And more importantly, can the overall crop of movies, large and small, get better?



And then came a killer shark ...



... and a Jedi knight...

I do not dispute the underpinning of Anderson's analysis. There is no question that the industry has changed. But I, like Adegoke and Eleberse among others, have difficulty sharing his optimism. Major studios are more dependent today on spectacle (such as the Marvel comic franchise) and on derivative stories (see *Tak3n*) than at any point in film history. As Time Warner CEO Jeff Bewkes said back in 2009, the success of *The Dark Knight* resulted in the following takeaway: "The obvious thing we're going to take from (the film's success) is more *Dark Knight*." [5] This lack of innovation at the top of the food chain has disastrous implications. No matter how many Lena Dunhams (*Tiny Furniture*, 2010) or Cary Fukunagas (*Sin Nombre*, 2009) emerge, it is highly likely that at some point they will become engulfed by a system that seems intent on recycling unreality.

The smaller, more indie-oriented films have indeed won the awards. The blockbusters and the remakes and the sequels have won the box office. It should not come as a great revelation that bigger, more-spectacle oriented movies, or that sequels to popular movies, do better at the box office than smaller scale original works. The bigger movies cost more. You would hope they earn more back. Historically, major film producers have been willing to spend big bucks on extravagant projects because the potential return is so great. The red ink from many failed movies can be washed away with one mega-hit. If you look at the top ten lists for virtually any decade, it will be dominated by spectacle-oriented films. But in past decades, even mainstream studios offered a more balanced and diversified roster of films. Therefore, if you go a little deeper into box office returns—say, the second ten in a given decade—a disturbing trend emerges. [6]

In the 1960s, that second ten had a fairly even mix of spectacle and story. Big budget spectacles like *Cleopatra* and *2001: A Space Odyssey* were balanced by dramas like the aforementioned *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* and *Bonnie and Clyde*. Even the top ten, which was skewed toward big-budget musicals, included *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* and *The Graduate*.

The 1970s, which witnessed the brief resurgence of original drama and comedy, was a gold mine for fans of those types of movies. The top ten boasted four original movies not primarily based on spectacle; *The Sting*, *Animal House*, *The Godfather*, and *Smokey and the Bandit*. A little something for everyone. And the second ten was almost entirely comprised of similar, non-blockbusters. Only *The Towering Inferno*, *Jaws 2*, and *Airport* could be called out-and-out spectacle blockbusters.

Moving into the 1980s, blockbuster culture was clearly on the rise. And sequels were also gaining support in the board rooms of the major studios. Even so, original comedies *Beverly Hills Cop* and *Back to the Future* cracked the top ten, and the second ten was again dominated by original adult-oriented fare like *Tootsie*, *Rain Man*, and *Fatal Attraction*. By the end of the decade, the major studios had essentially cast their lot with spectacle. "Packaging" and "franchises" were the concepts of the day. The symbolic knockout punch came



... and finally, a rich man in a black cape.



In the second half of the 20th century, comedies and dramas like *Animal House* were seen as commercially viable properties ...

in 1989, when Time-Warner rolled out the new *Batman* franchise.[7] The blockbusters had won.

The 1990s, though clearly within the recognized era of the blockbuster, had three top ten movies—*Forest Gump*, *The Sixth Sense*, and *Home Alone*—which were not initially conceived of as blockbusters. The fact that they all did exceptionally well should not erase the fact that they were developed as original stories (or in the case of *Forest Gump*, adapted from a novel), primarily based on plot and character. Special effects may have figured into them, but they were not what we would consider special effects movies. The second ten had a few movies—*Mrs. Doubtfire*, *Ghost*, and to a certain degree *Saving Private Ryan*—that were conceived of in terms of plot and character as well. *Private Ryan* clearly has a great many effects, but I consider it an original story in which effects played an important, but not a defining, role.

As the millennium turned over, non-spectacles and non-sequels all but vanished from the top of the box office lists. Amongst the top twenty films of the new century's first decade, you would be hard-pressed to find a title that is not primarily dependent on spectacle, or is not a sequel. Often, it is both. The closest you can come to an exception would be movies like *The Passion of the Christ* or the first *Harry Potter* film, neither in the top ten. There are some very good movies in that top twenty—movies which boast good plotlines and intriguing characters. Movies like *The Dark Knight* and *The Return of the King*. But it needs to be pointed out that unless you really stretch the definition, for the first time in its history, Hollywood did not produce a single top twenty original movie in the broad genres of drama or comedy. So far, in our current half-completed decade, that trend has continued. There is not a single original adult-oriented story not predicated upon spectacle amongst the box office giants. There have been movies based on comic books (*The Dark Knight Rises*, 2012) and cartoons geared towards kids (*Frozen*, 2013). There have been movies about dystopian rebellions (*Hunger Games*, 2012) and movies about superheroes (*Marvel's The Avengers*, 2012). And there have been sequels galore—provided they were about dystopian rebellions and superheroes (*Hunger Games Catching Fire*, 2013, *Toy Story 3*, 2010, *Iron Man 3*, 2013). But where are the economically successful suspense stories (like *The Sixth Sense*) or the comedies (like *Tootsie*) or the dramas (like *Kramer vs Kramer*)? If they exist at all, they are being drowned out by an ever-increasing flood of *Fast & Furious* *Despicable Iron Men. Pt. 3*.



... though the spectacle would gain a larger and larger share of the box office.



In 1988, the adult drama *Rain Man* grossed over \$350 million worldwide and won four major Oscars.



A year later, *Batman* only grossed a little over \$400 million, but auxiliary marketing and cross promotions led to a seemingly inexhaustible supply of similar superhero movies.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

What it means



How many movie-goers will see Jake Gyllenhaal's truly terrifying Louis Bloom in Dan Gilroy's *Nightcrawler*? ...



... Probably not nearly as many as will see this subordinate *Nightcrawler* from *X-Men 2*.

Should this matter? If Anderson was right, then should we care that the multiplexes are devoting more and more screen space to derivative, spectacle-oriented work? If you can watch the latest low budget art house gem on your new improved iPhone, then what does it matter?

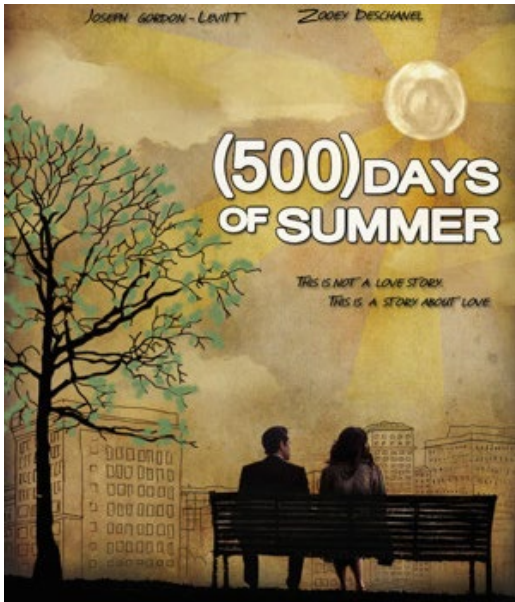
It matters a lot. It may be true that real artistic innovation can come from a couple of kids with a camcorder and a dream. They funnel that dream through whatever cheap editing software they have and put it up as a short form Internet program. It lights a spark. The ultra-hip youth of Portland or Memphis or Manchester pick up on it at first, and soon it has gone viral. Then what happens? It either flames out because the market is so glutted with other kids with other dreams and different editing suites that, without financial backing, our original dreamer has to fold up her tent. Or, she goes after the cash. And by cash, I mean the deep-pocketed Hollywood studios that have always been quick to buy up whatever is young and hip and hot. But if those Hollywood studios are so entrenched in the culture of spectacle and sequel, how are they possibly going to foster new movies without having them fall into the spectacle-sequel trap?

The long tail theory is predicated upon more accessible methods of production and distribution. What it never accounted for, or at least what it never *properly* accounted for, was marketing. In the free-for-all world of modern distribution, rising above the multitudinous din requires some magical potion of savvy and luck. And money helps. The world of popular music has a longer track record with the long tail and it is hard to see where positive musical change has come about. Anita Elberse's book notes that approximately one third of all music tracks that are downloaded are downloaded a single time. A sizeable piece of that long tail could blow away in a modest wind. It is far cheaper and less time-consuming to record a three-minute pop song than to produce a feature film. The musician is better positioned to throw out more product in hopes of catching a spark.

For the independent filmmaker trying to catch that same spark, social media cleverness and an MBA's sense of guerrilla marketing become essential. Notice that these skills have little to do with cinematic originality. There have been some start-ups that have attempted to fill in the marketing gap for new, out-of-the-mainstream filmmakers. The From Here to Awesome (FHTA) Festival, begun in 2008 by independent filmmakers Lance Weiler, Arin Crumley, and Mike Belmont, was a noble effort to create a community amongst the would-be up & comers.[8] But its method for selecting worthy projects was predicated on Internet voting, and Internet voting favors the savvy marketer. A few years later, NeoFlix, a fulfillment house designed to empower independent filmmakers by providing marketing and distribution services, was launched with great fanfare. Within a few years, it had to close shop. Its president John Chang, in announcing the collapse, wrote, "The long tail concept did not track for most clients as most films would receive a burst of sale in the initial weeks or perhaps even months, and tail off sharply after that." [9] What is most interesting about this statement is that it is equally true for almost all movies, whether produced by your next-door neighbor or Time Warner. Time Warner, however, is diversified. One hit pays for a lot of failures. They can cross-promote and market those "failures" into new lives. It's likely that your next-door neighbor



Bryan Singer has moved from real people in *The Usual Suspects* to the mutants of *X-Men*.



In 2009, Marc Webb made a sparkling RomCom about a young man obsessing over a young woman. ...

cannot.

Dan Gilroy's 2014 *Nightcrawler* has gotten very solid reviews, which tend to focus on the film's indictment of modern media practices. Those reviews miss what is truly important about the movie. Haskell Wexler's *Medium Cool* (1969) and the Sidney Lumet/Paddy Chayefsky prescient *Network* (1976) nailed the media element 40 years ago. What's different about *Nightcrawler* (and please remember, we are talking about the movie and not the namesake X-Man mutant superhero with blue skin and a prehensile tail in *X-Men 2*) is the way its hero Louis Bloom aggressively markets himself. Louis is a free-lancer who has taken modern business classes and understands the value of branding. He doesn't run from his amorality. He cultivates it. He is a free lancer who is not looking to reinvent journalism. He just wants as big a piece of the existing industry as he can get. He knows marketing is the way to get it.

Back to the only really important question: Is the United States producing better or worse movies?

Christopher Nolan once made *Memento*. Now he makes *Batmen*. Bryan Singer made *The Usual Suspects* before moving to the land of *X-Men*. Marc Webb was responsible for *(500) Days of Summer*. Now he's responsible for not one, not two, but three *amazing Spidermen*. How about the Russo Brothers, going from the TV gem *Community* to *Captain America*, or Marc Forster, going from *Monster's Ball* to *World War Z*, or James Mangold, going from *Walk the Line* to *Wolverine* (and its sequel)? James Wan was the most stylish new purveyor of horror when he made *Saw*. Now he's the stylish new purveyor of the *seventh Fast & Furious*. Need I go on? I'm not saying some of these spectacles aren't fine films. I am saying that Hollywood is rapidly approaching the point at which it will turn everything into a spectacle. Or a remake. Or a remake of a spectacle.

The muted voice of independence

Look at it another way. **(30)** The Independent Spirit Awards were established in 1984 in large measure as a reaction against that tidal wave of blockbusters that had been launched a decade before. The goal of the awards was to recognize and promote artists working outside the mainstream of Hollywood production. There were special awards for first features and micro-budgeted films. And though you can quibble with individual tastes and selections, there is no question that throughout their first fifteen years, the awards played a major role in developing powerful, independent-minded voices. If you consider the men and women who have been nominated in the First Feature category—the up-and-comers—the future of the industry—the Independent Spirit Awards have a staggering track record. There was no “First Feature” award in 1986, but the co-recipient of the Best Director award was Joel Coen, winning for his first movie, *Blood Simple*. Since then, and prior to 2000, here are some other names that have either won or been nominated for their first features: Spike Lee, Todd Haynes, Richard Linklater, Quentin Tarantino, Robert Rodriguez, David O. Russell, Kevin Smith, Paul Thomas Anderson, Darren Aronofsky, Spike Jonze. Among the most important directors working in America over the last 25 years. This time period was dubbed by film critic Jeffrey Sconce as the era of “new smart cinema,” and it may be the last great period of U.S. film.[10]

Look at the same list post-2000. Obviously these directors would not have had as much time to develop their careers, but many of the names on the list above had followed up their initial success with something of note within five years.



In his next film, he had another young man obsessing over another young woman. Only this time, the young man wore a spider mask and shot webs from his fingers.



In Marc Forster's *Monster's Ball*, a harrowing adult drama about loneliness and prejudice, the "monsters" are figurative

Todd Solondz, who was nominated for his withering debut portrait of U.S. youth, *Welcome to the Dollhouse* in 1995, was able to direct the equally withering portrait of suburbia *Happiness* just three years later. Alexander Payne, who wasn't even nominated for his satire *Citizen Ruth* (1996) was still able to build on the promise of his debut with the equally penetrating and more accessible satire of *Election* (1999). If you focus on the more recent crop of Independent Spirit nominees who have had more than five years since their debut, you reach a disheartening conclusion. There are some excellent movies represented on the list, but where are the careers for Richard Kelly (*Donnie Darko*) and Dylan Kidd (*Roger Dodger*)? Karyn Kusama (*Girlfight*) and Patty Jenkins (*Monster*)? Goran Dukic (*Wristcutters: A Love Story*) and Vadim Perelman (*House of Sand and Fog*)? It is hard to find anyone who was nominated for a first feature between 2000 and 2009 who has developed a significant film career. Arguably the most successful director of the lot has been Catherine Hardwicke who exploded on the scene with the in-your-face coming of age drama *Thirteen* in 2003. Her best-known work since then was 2008's crowd pleasing, but non-threatening vampire fantasy *Twilight*. Many writers, like Paul Haggis, or actors, like Julie Delpy, launched directing careers during the decade, but to this point, none has created what we might consider a significant directing career. Maybe the most intriguing name on the list of recent nominees is Lena Dunham, who has yet to make a second film after *Tiny Furniture* in 2010. Dunham, like Patty Jenkins and Nicole Kassell (*The Woodsman*) before her, has found a more welcoming home on television than in the world of feature filmmaking.[11]

Or consider the following list of names: Henry Bean, Rebecca Miller, Shari Springer Berman, Robert Pulcini, Shane Carruth, Richard Glatzer, Christopher Zalla, Courtney Hunt, Debra Granik. Those are the directors of eight of the ten Sundance Film Festival Grand Jury Prize winning movies from the first decade of the 21st century. Sundance, even more so than the Independent Spirit Awards, was once a harbinger of new independent voices. The movies represented on this list, like Carruth's mind-blowing *Primer* (2004) and Granik's brilliant drama *Winter's Bone* (2010), are not lesser films than earlier Sundance winners. But their directors have not been able to use this recognition to build successful filmmaking careers. The two filmmakers I did not list are Ira Sachs and Lee Daniels. Daniels managed mainstream success with *Lee Daniels' The Butler* (2013), and Sachs has gotten some attention for 2014's *Love is Strange*. The fact that I personally find *Love is Strange* very disappointing



In his *World War Z*, the zombies are real.
 (Author's note: to the best of my knowledge,
 zombies actually are not real.)

doesn't particularly bother me. I am just grateful that Sachs had the opportunity to film a story about aging homosexuals, a subject rarely confronted by mainstream Hollywood.

Why have these particular barometers ceased to be a predictor of future success in U.S. film? Is it because the directors simply aren't as good? Is it because the public has soured on films with an "independent spirit?" Independent filmmakers from earlier eras, from Italian Francesco Rosi,[12] maker of such seminal movies as *Salvatore Giuliano* (1962) and *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* (1987), to producer Maggie Renzi,[13] who worked with indie icon John Sayles right through the heart of that New Smart Cinema era, blame the relative ease of access to both production materials and money for weakening the crucial winnowing-out process that existed back when it was harder to make a movie. Whether that's true or not, the answer, which is almost certainly a combination of many factors, really doesn't matter. Whatever the reason, the mainstream of U.S. filmmaking seems less able to foster emerging talent than at any time in its history. And that, regardless of distribution methods, is a scary proposition.



Jeanne Lucas and Anne Kimmel devised the Independent Spirit Awards in 1984, in part to promote small movies against the Hollywood blockbusters which were becoming more and more common.



Election, Alexander Payne's second feature, was nominated for both an Oscar and Independent Spirit Awards. He has built a career that includes two Oscars and three Independent Spirit Awards.



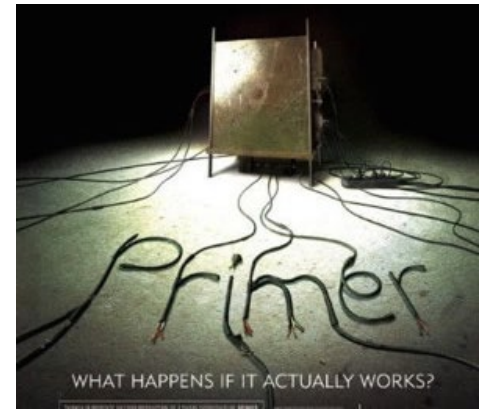
But Richard Kelly, whose debut *Donnie Darko* was nominated for 3 Independent Spirit Awards and which won festival prizes from Australia to Sweden to Toronto, has yet to have a significant follow-up.



Lena Dunham won an Independent Spirit Award for *Tiny Furniture* in 2010. But she has found far more success on television with *Girls*.



The Sundance Film Festival has been a great source of independent cinema since its humble beginnings in 1978.



But Sundance's recent crop of young directors, like Shane Carruth, who made the mind-bending *Primer* in 2004, have had trouble building on their success.

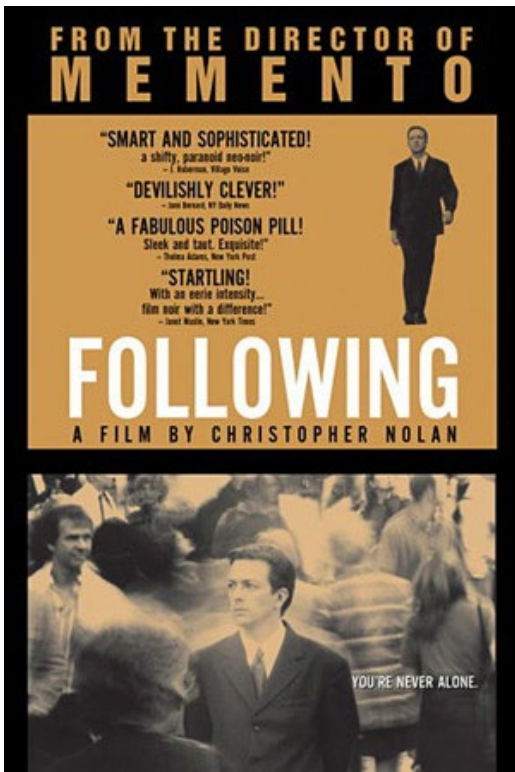
Last year, when accepting an award from the Washington DC chapter of Women In Film & Video, veteran producer/director Penny Marshall told the audience that the movie for which she was being honored (National Film Preservation Board selection *A League of Their Own*) could not be made today. It had no trailer moments (read: aliens or explosions) on page 1. It was not animated, and thus not easily translatable into foreign languages and markets. It was not based on a very popular novel or play. It was not a sequel. It was just a good story.

The case of *Interstellar*

Christopher Nolan, who began his career with the micro-budget thriller *Following* in 1998, released *Interstellar* in 2014 with a reported budget of \$165 million. There is the suggestion in *Interstellar* that mankind's capacity for survival is virtually limitless. So too are the number of metaphors that can be drawn from Nolan's new movie about the current state of U.S. film. The one that involves J.C. Chandor may be the most telling.

Chandor, along with Scott Cooper, suggest that the future for new U.S. filmmakers may not be as bleak as what I outlined above. Within the last five years, both men have put out strong debuts (*Margin Call* and *Crazy Heart*, respectively) and then have been able to follow them up with promising second features (*All is Lost* and *Out of the Furnace*). Of course, the jury is still out on their long term career prospects. Chandor presents a particularly intriguing case because of his direct run-in with a major studio blockbuster.

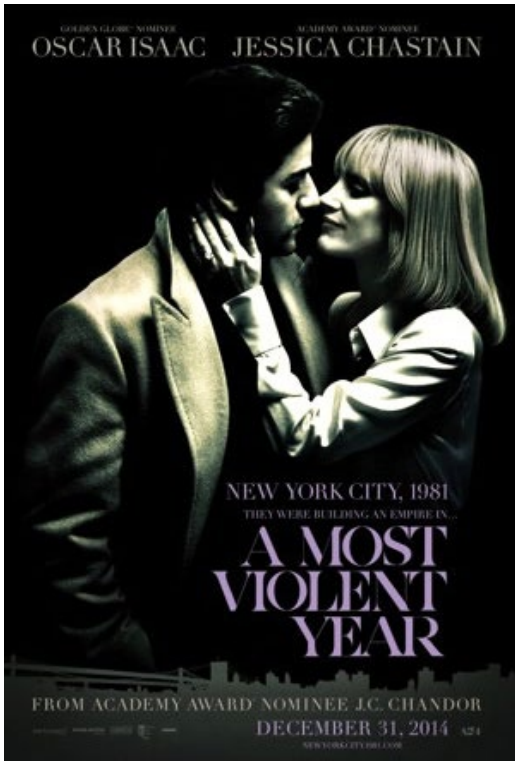
Chandor's 2nd movie, 2013's *All is Lost*, had a similar premise as the 2013 blockbuster *Gravity*, but with a radically different approach to storytelling. His 3rd film, *A Most Violent Year*, was scheduled for release on December 31, 2014. The crime story, starring Oscar Isaac and Jessica Chastain, received generally good early buzz. Chastain received particular praise. As the film began playing at festivals, her performance garnered Oscar-talk. Under normal circumstances, distributor A24 would aggressively promote such a performance by having Chastain make the media rounds, appearing at events, doing interviews, etc. But Chastain is also co-starring in Paramount's *Interstellar*, which is also vying for box office and Oscar nominations in the same year. As detailed in the *New York Times* on 11/5/14,[14] Christopher Nolan and Paramount have effectively prevented Chastain from doing publicity for *A Most Violent Year*. They have her devoting all of her "marketing" energy to *Interstellar*. The final chapter is yet to be written on the two films, but this situation certainly provides a clear picture of the way in which marketing prowess can trump other considerations. Regardless of access to production and distribution, marketing gives the major studios a seemingly insurmountable advantage.



Christopher Nolan's 1st movie, *Following*, had a reported budget of \$6 thousand.



Nolan's latest movie, *Interstellar*, cost 27,500 times as much as his debut.



J. C Chandor has been able to buck the trend for new directors interested in smaller original stories about real people. *A Most Violent Year* is his third such movie in four years.



Despite some recent successes, documentaries continue to struggle to find screens in American theaters. *Glen Campbell: I'll Be Me*, one of 2014's most compelling movies, faced that struggle. Whether it will find success on smaller

And the marketing of *Interstellar* provides a window into what Hollywood considers its most important asset in 2014. Early trailers for Nolan's movie were fairly standard. They stressed the intriguing premise—that Earth is a used-up planet and that in order to survive, mankind must find a new home—and the characters involved—primarily Matthew McCaughey as the hero torn between wanting to save mankind and not wanting to abandon his daughter. There was plenty of spectacle on display, as you might expect in space travel movie. But as the release date grew closer, the trailers went through a fascinating change. No longer was the story front and center. In fact, the premise, the plot, and the characters were virtually invisible in the new trailers. They were replaced by the technicians who worked on the film, from Nolan himself to his designers and technical crew touting the “reality” of the production. Chastain was replaced by costume designer Mary Zophres, noting how all the costumes were designed to really be worn by space travelers. It was as clear an example as I have ever seen of spectacle replacing story as the central element in the creation and marketing of U.S. film.

That is, until I saw a screening of the documentary *Glen Campbell: I'll Be Me* (2014). The remarkable movie tells the story of country music legend Campbell's final tour, covering 151 shows. Shortly before the tour, Campbell was diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease, and the film provides an intimate portrait of the man, his family, and his devilish adversary. The movie, which was still struggling to find wide distribution, had a special one-time screening at a multiplex in suburban Maryland. *Interstellar* was playing in the next theater and on at least three occasions, the explosive base from *Interstellar*'s booming soundtrack invaded the neighboring theater like a freight train trundling by your window in the middle of the night. *I'll Be Me*'s producer Trevor Albert could only laugh at how perfectly those moments summed up the way in which big-movie spectacle was trampling smaller independent cinema.

Whither goest Aristotle?

The studios have always been greedy. The original moguls—Zukor, Mayer, Warner—never considered themselves artists. They saw a way to make a quick buck and they ran with it. But there was a time when making a quick buck meant developing stories that adhered to the dramatic elements identified by Aristotle more than two thousand years ago. Of the six elements he identified, plot and character came at the top of the list. Spectacle was at the bottom. Aristotle allowed that certain types of plays elevated spectacle above that sixth place ranking.

We have entered an era of U.S. film where spectacle is clearly considered to be the most important of the elements by the people who are in position to choose what will be filmed. When that is combined with an over-reliance on sequel, the future of the industry is in peril. Producers want to make sequels to popular movies because they consider that to be a safer bet. With the budget of the average film sky-rocketing over 100 million dollars, producers are understandably hesitant to take risks. Like their forefathers in the '50s who tried to spend their way out of the war with television, today's producers have adopted the mindset that more money on lavish spectacle will save film. And like those forefathers, in the short term, they appear to be onto something. Profits are strong. But those profits are propped up by multiple factors. Exhibitors have maximized consumer spending through attractive food and beverage displays and by converting their screens into advertizing mediums. Producers are seeing great rewards in international markets where, spectacle and animation overcome the language barrier more readily than do other

screens remains to be seen.



In the years to come, will American filmmakers continue to offer compelling and challenging stories about real people, like Jeremy Saulnier's *Blue Ruin*?



Or is this all we have to look forward to?

genres. But over the last ten years, actual ticket sales have declined markedly. I contend that the emphasis on spectacle and its cousins, sequel and cartoon, are undermining the infrastructure of an industry built upon clever, moving and innovative stories. How many more superhero origin stories—and sequels to superhero origin stories—can we really watch? How many more times can the zombies attack? How many more times can the world nearly end?

The end

Zach Braff directed his first movie, *Garden State*, in 2004. It took him ten years to film his next project, 2014's *Wish I Was Here*. Did Braff, a very popular television actor, particularly amongst the young demographic in which Hollywood seems most interested, have to wait so long because his 1st film only grossed \$25 million in domestic receipts? It made back ten times its estimated production budget, but still grossed less than half the cost of an average Hollywood production.[15] Or did he run into roadblocks because *Garden State* was the first mainstream drama to level an accusatory eye at the over-medication of America's youth, which by extension could be read as a criticism of the vast U.S. medical/pharmaceutical industry? In other words, is Hollywood's neglect benign or malignant? Regardless of how you see it, I think we can all agree that making one picture every ten years is not a reliable recipe for artistic growth. I have faith in Hollywood's capacity to be part of the solution (even if they are a major part of the problem) because Hollywood has done it before. The numbers may be bigger in 2014 than they were in 1914, but the imperative to make profit is no different today than it was when Adolph Zukor battled Thomas Edison for control of a new industry. Zukor and his cohorts won by investing in stories and marketing the hell out of them. Can it happen again?

The USA has produced some remarkable movies in the past few years. Deeply-felt, well-crafted adult stories that explore important thematic questions. Movies like Denis Villeneuve's *Prisoners*, Jeremy Saulnier's *Blue Ruin*, and Damien Chazelle's *Whiplash*. They have been distributed through mainstream channels such as Warners, Sony, and the Weinstein Company. All of these companies have smaller, more independently-minded subsidiaries which seem constantly on the verge of merger, reorganization, or outright shuttering. It has happened to Warner's Picturehouse, Paramount Vantage, Capitol Films' THINKFilm. Such producers are always at risk during times of economic turmoil, and 2008-2009 was particularly difficult for these types of production houses.[16] But hopefully, the mainstream studios will see value in maintaining an industry that promotes well-crafted adult stories.

I do not have an all-encompassing solution to how this might resolve. But if I have learned anything from the long tail, it is that small voices like mine don't need to solve all the major problems. We just need to contribute a thought. Then, hopefully, a million of those thoughts all join forces at the back end of that tail and the best ideas can emerge, polished and evolved, ready to change the world. So here's my thought: a two-tiered Academy Award system. Identical awards for big budgets and for medium/small budgets. Draw the dividing line wherever you want. Start at \$100 million. This way, smaller movies will get the marketing weight of the Academy behind them. I know what you are going to say. The Academy has been giving big prizes to modestly-budgeted movies for a while now. Why would two tiers improve the situation? Maybe it would get audiences to focus more specifically on smaller budgets and see them as a group of films worth applauding. Or maybe it wouldn't. It's just a thought. Go ahead and add yours. Don't let Nightcrawler (and here, we are in fact talking about the X-Man) have the only meaningful tail in modern U.S. film.

Postscript

On December 18, 2014, as this article was preparing for publication, Sony Pictures decided to cancel the scheduled release of *The Interview*. The comedy, starring James Franco and Seth Rogen, was premised on the fictional assassination of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. After threats of violence against theaters intending to present the film, all major exhibitors cancelled their screenings and Sony withdrew the release. This is a very early chapter in what is likely to be a complex story about business, government, philosophy, and personal expression. But one thing became clear almost immediately. There were a great many calls for Sony to release *The Interview* online. Whether it proves major or minor over time, the distribution avenues on which the long tail is predicated are here to stay. Might we see a two-tiered system in which difficult material is relegated to online distribution and spectacle is similarly relegated to traditional movie theatres – a paradigm not unlike what has developed in the U.S. theater world (Off-Broadway/ Regional theatres showing the challenging material while Broadway specializes in spectacle)? Check back in another decade to examine how events none of us see coming will continue to remake the system.

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11. Many female writer/producers have found a more welcoming home on television than in the world of feature films. Writer Winner Holtzman, creator of the teen drama *My So-Called Life*, speaking on a panel at the 1993 Austin Heart of Film Screenwriting Conference, explained some of the advantages of television. One advantage she described was that television operates on a

much faster work schedule and that feedback from your audience came much faster than it did from a movie. Therefore, the learning curve for a television writer is much steeper. They learn very quickly what works and what doesn't work, and can grow and improve as a result.

12. From the Criterion Collection DVD of *Salvatore Giuliano*. In commentary, film critic Peter Cowie relates the following from Francesco Rossi: "Our generation was impressed and dominated by the camera because the camera was a means of expression. Nowadays, with digital cameras and very small cameras, it's all changed. At the time of *Salvatore Giuliano*, the camera was a mystery and had to be wielded with great skill. The choice of composition or movement was very important. Today, young directors are much more casual in their attitude toward the camera." Date unknown.

13. Carson, Diane. "Let's Not Compromise: An Interview with Independent Film Producer Maggie Renzi." *Journal of Film and Video*. Spring, 2010. Renzi, when discussing the current crop of smaller, independent-minded films, says "... they're all competing for the same space in art house theaters and in the mind of the moviegoers. What happens with this glut of films- where there's no real winnowing system early on, and there's the huge impulse toward anything new and reaching the youth audience- is that we're getting a lot of unfinished films, films where the bar isn't set high enough for storytelling, for universality of story, of theme, and particularly where the production values are really not good enough."

14. Cieply, Michael. "One Star, 2 Films and Conflict." *Nytimes.com*. The New York Times. 5 November, 2014. Web. 6 November, 2014.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/06/business/media/jessica-chastain-in-a-publicity-tug-of-war.html>

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http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1950925_1950923_1951013,00.html.

As with box office figures, budget numbers can be hard to verify. Corliss notes that the average movie budget doubled in ten years, from \$53 million in 1998 to \$106 million in 2008.

16. Zeitchik, Steven. "Specialty Film Business Reeling After Cutbacks." *Reuters.com*. Reuters. 6 June, 2008. Web. 5 November 2014.
<http://www.reuters.com/article/2008/06/07/film-arthouse-dc-idUSN0642650320080607>

Additional Reading

Denby, David. *Do the Movies Have a Future?* New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012. New Yorker film critic David Denby discusses a variety of issues facing the modern film world, including the concept of "platform agnosticism."

Turran, Kenneth. *Sundance to Sarajevo: Film Festival and the World They Made*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002. Turan,

film critic for the Los Angeles Times, discusses the impact of film festivals on the film world in a personal account of his travels.

Various. *History of American Cinema Series*. Ed. Charles Harpole. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, Various. Harpole's ten volume history, each book written by a different author and focusing on a different decade, is an excellent resource for tracking the evolution of the American film industry.

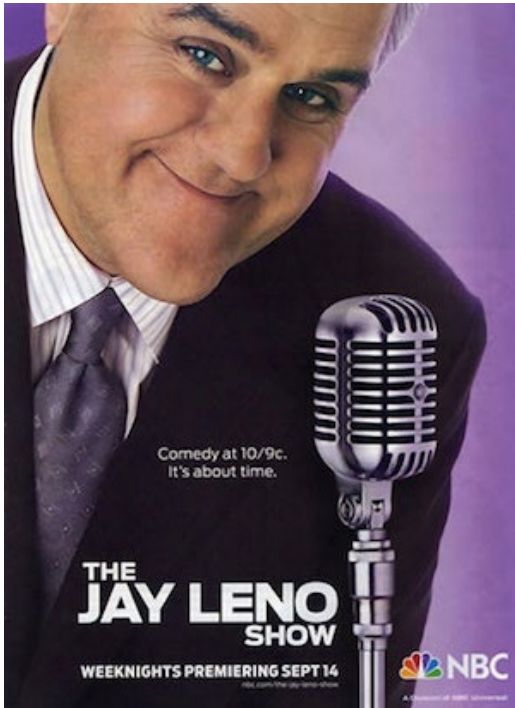
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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



For several months leading up to the September premiere of *The Jay Leno Show*, NBC ran a nightly promo for it at 10 PM.

The white flag of surrender? NBC, *The Jay Leno Show*, and failure on contemporary broadcast television

by [Kimberly Owczarski](#)

On December 9, 2008, Ben Silverman and Marc Graboff, then the co-chairmen of U.S. broadcast network NBC, held a press conference to make a surprising announcement: the network would strip a show centering on popular late-night television host Jay Leno across the 10 PM hour beginning in September 2009.[1][[open endnotes in new window](#)]

	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
7:00	Familiar faces and new favorites here on NBC						FOOTBALL NIGHT IN AMERICA
8:00	HEROES	THE BIGGEST LOSER	MERCY	SNL THURSDAY COMMUNITY	LAW & ORDER	DATELINE	SUNDAY NIGHT FOOTBALL
8:30				PLAYS AND RECREATION			
9:00	TRIALIA		LAW & ORDER: SVU	THE OFFICE	SOUTHLAND	TRIALIA (ENCORE)	
9:30				30 ROCK (Returns October)			
10:00	THE JAY LENO SHOW THE JAY LENO SHOW ALL NEW COMEDY, FIVE NIGHTS A WEEK!						LAW & ORDER: SVU (ENCORE)

The prime time line-up for NBC's Fall 2009 schedule

As the fourth place network, NBC had struggled for several years to attract the industry's key demographic of 18-49 year-old viewers, particularly with its prime time dramas. If NBC was ever to pull out of its ratings slump, executives certainly needed to try a new approach to the network's overall programming and content. Although executives for the network had been hinting for years that they would like to shakeup the traditional broadcast schedule, no one in the industry was quite prepared for a talk show to occupy five hours, or one-third,



A nearly four minute promo for *The Jay Leno Show* ran in movie theaters across the country before the show's September premiere. Also featuring *Saturday Night Live* performer Fred Armisen, the video parodies *The Blair Witch Project*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MEwK1ozHoFY>



In a spot referencing Jay Leno's love for classic cars, this ad during the 2010 Super Bowl highlighted his 10 PM prime time show. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=39NJ0f7J4aY>



After Taylor Swift began her acceptance speech for the Best Female Video at the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards (VMA), Kanye West rushed the stage and took the microphone from her. He announced that Beyonce's video for the song "Single Ladies" was "one of the best videos of all time!" to a stunned studio audience.



of valuable prime time real estate during the week.

It may have seemed like NBC was waving the white flag of surrender with *The Jay Leno Show*. But the program was based on a very successful, long-standing format—the late-night talk show, a staple on U.S. television for the last sixty years—that could potentially address the harsh realities of the contemporary prime time landscape, particularly for a struggling broadcast network. Indeed, late-night talk shows are among the few types of programs that experienced an increase in viewership for the broadcast networks in the first half of the 2000s, despite the increasing challenges presented by cable, DVRs, and online viewing. [2]

From the announcement until the show went on the air nine months later, NBC's plan to significantly alter its prime time schedule with a stripped talk show became the center of much debate, controversy and scorn, with the network's decision endlessly dissected in the *New York Times*, *Time* magazine, *Variety*, as well as many other media outlets. ("Stripped" is a media industry term meaning having the show run at the same time every day.) *The Jay Leno Show* finally premiered on September 14, 2009, and it did exceptionally well in the ratings.

The first episode attracted over 18 million viewers and received a 5.3 rating/13 share in the 18-49 demographic.[3] Its success on that first night was due to three main factors.

First, the fall premieres of many prime time programs were a week away so it faced little in terms of direct competition.

Second, the advertising and marketing blitz prepared by NBC over those nine months left many viewers curious about the show. A long, comedic video shown in 16,000 movie theaters; a memorable thirty second commercial which aired during the 2009 Super Bowl; and a promo every single night at 10 PM EST on NBC for several months leading up to the new show's debut—all of these marketing elements contributed to a hyper-presence for the comedian. In fact, by August 2009, NBC's research indicated that 80% of the public was aware of Leno's new 10 PM program.[4]

Finally, among the guests slated for that first episode, *The Jay Leno Show* fortuitously featured Kanye West who had stolen the microphone the previous evening from country superstar Taylor Swift as she accepted the "Best Female Video Award" at MTV's Video Music Awards in order to declare Beyonce the more deserving winner for that category. Many viewers tuned in to see how West would respond to the controversy surrounding his inappropriate actions.

But a strong premiere does not make a show a hit; it has to sustain a large audience over an extended period of time. The ratings success of the premiere night turned out to be short-lived, and *The Jay Leno Show* soon settled into the unspectacular routine of attracting somewhere between four and six million viewers each night, and achieving a rating between 1.5 and 2.0 within the 18-49 demographic. Local affiliates started to speak of a so-called "Jay Leno Effect" as ratings for the 11 PM news dropped precipitously in a number of large markets. As advertising during news programs makes up the largest percentage of local station revenue (at an average of 40 to 50 percent), ratings drops have a significant impact on potential profitability.[5] The 11 PM newscasts are particularly vulnerable to lowered ratings, as they run an extra ad break before turning to the network-programmed talk shows at 11:35 PM.

With the affiliates' growing discontent over *The Jay Leno Show*'s harmful lead-in to their local news, the situation became dire in December 2009. As a result, Jeff Gaspin, Chairman of NBC Universal Television Entertainment, announced on January 10, 2010, that *The Jay Leno Show* had been cancelled and would be

Kanye West was already scheduled to appear with Jay-Z and Rihanna to perform their single “Run This Town” on the first episode of *The Jay Leno Show*. He sat down with Leno the day after the VMA incident to apologize for his inappropriate action.



In its January 29, 2010, issue, *Entertainment Weekly* named *The Jay Leno Show* one of the biggest bombs in television history.



In sharp contrast, in 2009 the annual Harris Poll listed Jay Leno as the top television personality. Since he took over *The Tonight Show* in 1992, Leno had been consistently in the top ten but had never appeared in the top spot.

off the air before NBC’s coverage of the 2010 Olympic Games began in February. In his announcement, Gaspin stressed that the cancellation was a difficult decision and primarily reached because of the impact of the program on local affiliates and not on the network itself:

“I would have liked nothing more than to give it a 52 week try. . . . [The affiliates] made it clear they would be more vocal about their displeasure. Then they started talking about preemption.”[6]

While its performance certainly was detrimental to local affiliates’ ratings, *The Jay Leno Show* can hardly be classified as a network failure. From NBC’s perspective, *The Jay Leno Show* actually achieved a number of feats for the troubled network. It pleased advertisers, efficiently filled a number of holes in the prime time schedule, and ultimately proved profitable. 90% of new shows fail to earn a second season and most are quickly forgotten.[7] Unlike most series failures, however, NBC’s attempt to significantly alter the prime time landscape through *The Jay Leno Show* made it a much more important failure, and its removal from the schedule left a longer lasting mark on the network than typical series failures. As media scholar Jason Mittell argues,

“Failures help us understand the limits of the system as well as the possibilities that got passed over, and thus they need to be viewed alongside clear successes and within the gray area in between.”[8]

Examining failed series provides an opportunity to define the boundaries of what constitutes successful television at a given time. As the program failed to last more than six months on the air, NBC’s very aberrant programming decision with *The Jay Leno Show* is an instructive case study of the challenges broadcast networks face in the contemporary television marketplace and the limits of taking significant programming risks in such an environment.

The Jay Leno Show may be regarded as yet another failure in television’s long history of cancelled programs, but in its failure, the show ultimately reiterated the importance of the 10 PM drama, as well as the primary business model for broadcast television of network affiliation. It also showed the risks of programming experimentation in a landscape marked by significant technological innovation. Thus, its failure confirmed that the traditional models remained an important aspect of the contemporary broadcast television landscape despite the increasing demands of the post-network marketplace.

Talk shows, reality shows, and the contemporary television landscape

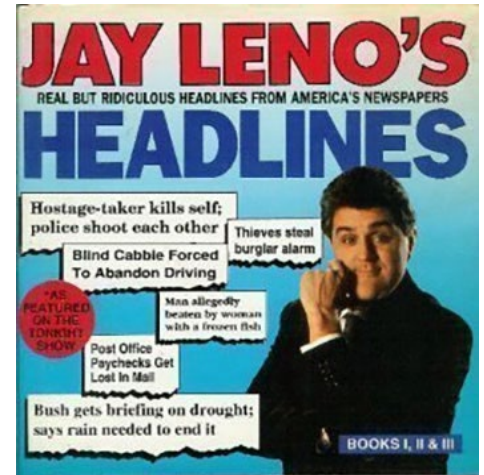
In many of the promotions for *The Jay Leno Show* in 2008 and 2009, NBC touted that Leno was “America’s #1 TV personality,” a claim based on the annual Harris Poll rankings of television celebrities.[9] Having come off his seventeen-year stint as the host of NBC’s long-running franchise *The Tonight Show* in May 2009 with the highest ratings in late-night television, Leno was indeed a popular and well-known figure. To reassure his fans, the promotions for his new show stressed that a number of his key segments—including his opening monologue, Headlines, Jaywalking, and Battle of the Jaywalk Allstars—would also be a part of his prime time series.[10]

These promotions also emphasized the focus would be on comedy and laughter rather than murder, guns, and grim crime stories as typically seen in the 10 PM slot. This last hour of prime time has historically been filled with more adult-oriented dramas that feature (brief) nudity, graphic violence, and profanity because the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) deemed the hours between 10 PM and 6 AM to be the Safe Harbor—a time period where children were expected to be asleep and the FCC relaxed regulation over content shown

on broadcast television.



In “Battle of the Jaywalk All-Stars,” Leno brings some of the funniest individuals from previous iterations of his “Jaywalking” segment to the studio. In a parody of *Jeopardy*, these individuals try to answer relatively simple questions but are nearly always wrong. Here, they are trying to answer a question about who killed President Abraham Lincoln.



The cover for a book based on the funniest “Headlines” seen on *The Tonight Show*.



A promo for *The Jay Leno Show* suggests that viewers just want to “laugh it off” after a long day.

The promotions for *The Jay Leno Show* claimed that at the end of the long day, the viewer just wants to “laugh it off.” Executives’ reasoning behind why Leno—and why comedy, rather than another drama—seem like fairly sound decisions in regard to prime time programming. After all, both the use of star power and counter-programming—the scheduling of a distinctive genre to go after a different audience than the other networks’ programming in the same time slot—have been key industrial strategies for decades. What is less obvious, however, is why network executives would take a risk on this type of format in the most important daypart, prime time. TV programming relies on reaching certain age groups and certain demographics in its scheduling according to dayparts, with prime time having the largest and most broad potential audience. While successful in other dayparts, the long-term stripping of programs in the prime time daypart has no successful precedent in contemporary U.S. television.

Yet, *The Jay Leno Show* can be seen as part of a much larger shift by the networks from expensive, scripted programming to a greater reliance on game shows, reality programs, and hybrids of those two genres, such as *Survivor* (CBS, 2000-present) or *The Biggest Loser* (NBC, 2004-present), over the last decade. What *The Jay Leno Show* offered NBC was a very successful, long-standing format as seen in *The Tonight Show* that could address the harsh realities of the contemporary television prime time landscape.

The late-night talk show format originated with television pioneer Sylvester ‘Pat’ Weaver, a top executive at NBC who developed *The Tonight Show* in 1954 with host Steve Allen. Through the program’s first three years on air, Allen featured a number of what would become late-night talk show staples: the opening monologue, segments involving the studio audience, comedic bits featuring the host, as well as the desk and couch setup of the stage. However, it

was Allen's successor Jack Paar, who hosted the show from 1957-1962, that centered the program around interviews with celebrities.[11]



The first iteration of *The Tonight Show* was launched in 1954 with host Steve Allen. He served as host until early 1957, when NBC gave him a prime time variety show to compete with CBS's very popular *The Ed Sullivan Show*.



Jack Paar served as the second host of *The Tonight Show* from 1957 until 1962. After he left, he also received a prime time program on NBC. In this episode from 1959, he interviews Robert Kennedy.

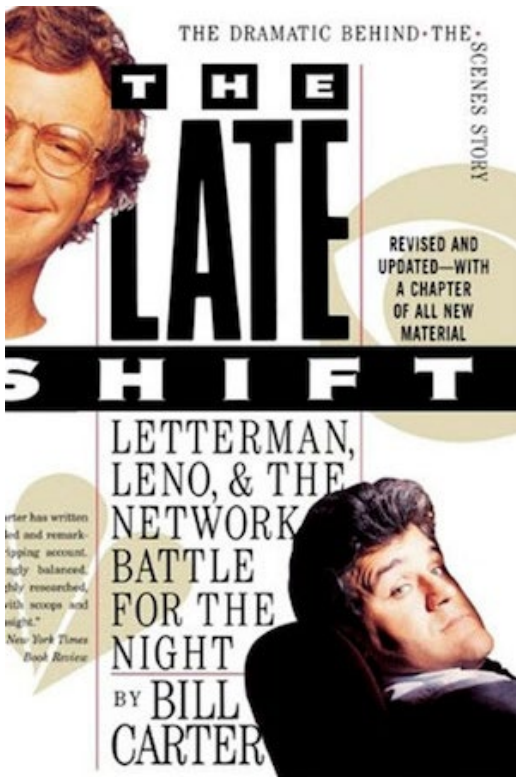


Johnny Carson dominated late-night ratings during his three decade tenure as *The Tonight Show* host. Carson's viewership numbers grew from less than ten million when he took over in 1962 to over 20 million during much of the 1980s. Here, he interviews Liberace during a 1986 episode.



The Late Show with David Letterman debuted on CBS on August 30, 1993, and featured Bill Murray as the first guest.

And it was Paar's successor, Johnny Carson, who turned *The Tonight Show* into a venerable franchise. Through Carson's thirty years of hosting the program, the



Bill Carter's nonfiction book about the struggles between the late night hosts and NBC inspired an HBO original movie, *The Late Shift*, originally released in 1996.

average nightly audience had grown from 7.5 million viewers in 1962 (doubling Paar's audience size) to 11 million viewers in 1972 to 17.3 million viewers by 1977 to over 20 million throughout much of the 1980s.[12] While other late-night programs had emerged in the late 1980s/early 1990s to challenge *The Tonight Show*, such as *The Arsenio Hall Show* on Fox from 1989-1994, none made much dent in Carson's viewership.

With Carson's retirement in 1992, however, the late-night landscape changed significantly. Leno's takeover of *The Tonight Show* from Carson was fraught with controversy and ended up creating more viable competition in that daypart. Although Leno had served as the permanent guest host of *The Tonight Show*, Carson favored David Letterman as his replacement for the franchise. Letterman, who also served as a guest host on several occasions for Carson, already had his own late-night show, *Late Night with David Letterman*, which followed *The Tonight Show* at 12:35 AM and was popular with the 18-49 audience. However, NBC executives preferred Leno, finding him easier to work with and his humor and interview style more appealing to the older demographic that typically watched *The Tonight Show*. Letterman stayed with NBC for a year after Leno became the new host in order to meet the terms of his contract, but he then jumped networks to CBS to host his own show opposite *The Tonight Show*. *New York Times* columnist Bill Carter wrote a nonfiction book about the late-night struggles between the two stars entitled *The Late Shift: Letterman, Leno, and the Network Battle for the Night*. Published in 1994, the book was later adapted into a popular television movie produced by pay cable network HBO, demonstrating the amount of interest viewers had in the two personalities and the fighting that occurred between the two networks at the time.

Leno's late-night show faltered for several years, continually losing to Letterman in the ratings. By the end of 1995, however, Leno began his ascendancy in late-night viewership.[13] Leno's re-tooling of *The Tonight Show* format and his image helped him gain new viewers. The set was re-done to place Leno and his guests closer to the studio audience, which translated well on-screen to the audience at home.



Dana Carvey's visit to *The Tonight Show* in September 1992 demonstrates how the late-night program could cross-promote other NBC properties—in this case, *Saturday Night Live*. It also shows the very formal desk and bland background that dominated the show's design in its early years.



Melanie Griffith's 1995 appearance on *The Tonight Show* shows how the set had evolved to have a brighter, busier background and a more casual desk.



During the O.J. Simpson trial, Leno delivered a steady stream of jokes in his monologue about the proceedings. This included popular segments like “The Dancing Itos,” where several male dancers are dressed like presiding Judge Lance Ito. This second version of the segment also features a dancer as Prosecutor Marcia Clark.

12 TV Stations to Abandon Big Three Networks for Fox : Entertainment: CBS loses eight affiliates in the history-making deal. Moves follow Fox's football pact. May 24, 1994 | JOHN LIPPMAN | TIMES STAFF WRITER

After the upstart Fox network outbid CBS for the broadcast rights to National Football Conference (NFC) games in 1993, several stations jumped affiliation from CBS to Fox in 1994.



Bret Michaels appears on *The Tonight Show* with Jay Leno on May 24, 2010, a day after it has been revealed that he won *The Celebrity Apprentice* on NBC.

The Tonight Show received a new bandleader with Kevin Eubanks, with whom Leno had a better rapport. Leno also spent nights and weekends on college campuses and in comedy clubs, earning him younger viewers than those who typically watched *The Tonight Show*.^[14] His monologue and comedic segments became more topical, seen in his frequent references to the O.J. Simpson trial occurring at the time with a sketch such as “The Dancing Itos” which featured a chorus line of men dressed as Judge Lance Ito.^[15]

At the same time, Letterman lost viewers as CBS experienced two major inter-related problems. First, the upstart Fox broadcast network had acquired the rights from CBS to broadcast National Football Conference (NFC) games beginning in 1994. Because the advertising revenue from the games is so lucrative, several local CBS stations jumped networks to become affiliated with Fox, which forced CBS to find weaker, smaller stations in those markets to air its programming.^[16] The NFC games also acted as a promotional mechanism for other network programming, so CBS lost a substantial marketing vehicle when the rights shifted to Fox. The 1994-95 season saw CBS's prime time programs collapse in their ratings, leaving Letterman without strong lead-ins to his late-night program.^[17] Strong lead-ins provided during prime time not only help the local news at 11 PM, but also the entire late-night programming lineup that follows. Although Letterman would briefly challenge Leno at times (such as when he returned from heart surgery in 2000), *The Tonight Show's* lead became too big to overcome. *The Tonight Show* remained the clear leader in late-night viewership throughout the rest of the decade and into the 2000s. However, it never regained the numbers seen regularly during Carson's tenure.

While not as heavily viewed as prime time programs, late-night talk shows are an important part of a network's schedule for a number of reasons.

- First, they are relatively cheap to produce, which means profit margins can be quite high and predictable. The largest expense is for top-of-the-line talent. For example, in his renegotiation with CBS in 2009, Letterman's salary was reported to be over \$30 million annually but was the largest expense for this program.^[18]
- Second, viewership tends to be regular. While there can be spikes in ratings depending upon the guest, the fan base tends to be fairly steady. This is due to the consistent nature of the programming. Since these talk shows are stripped, they are on at the same time Monday through Friday, nearly every day of the year. There are also fewer reruns of late night talk shows than done with prime time programs.
- Third, late-night talk shows offer spots for the promotion of network, and larger conglomerate, properties. For example, Bret Michaels, the winner of NBC series *The Celebrity Apprentice* for season nine, appeared on *The Tonight Show* on May 25, 2010, to promote himself and the show, while Universal Pictures, another part of the NBC Universal corporate family, used *The Tonight Show* as a venue to promote the film *Get Him to the Greek* (Nicholas Stoller, 2010) with an appearance by star Russell Brand on May 24, 2010.
- Finally, talk shows are easy to adapt to more recent distribution outlets which favor short-form video, including cell phones, iPods, and YouTube. According to media scholar Jeffrey P. Jones in “I Want My Talk TV: Network Talk Shows in a Digital Universe”:

“[B]ecause talk shows are created in specific segments, they have a natural structural advantage for easy distribution,



For his first episode as the host of *The Tonight Show*, Jimmy Fallon featured a segment with Will Smith called “Evolution of Hip-Hop Dancing.” Placed on YouTube, that clip has garnered over 20 million views, more than the actual number of viewers who watched the first episode live. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZTpn30Pms8I>

downloading, and viewing as short snippets in a variety of settings and through multiple technologies (from web and mobile devices to out-of-home viewing screens). As such, the content and form of talk shows are conducive to addressing these changes in distribution, as opposed to the longer 30- and 60-minute long-form programming found in prime time.”[19]

Due to their inherent segmentation, talk shows easily lend themselves to repurposing—the reuse of a program or part of a program across other corporate properties—while dramas and sitcoms do not. For example, NBC.com regularly offered Leno’s monologue each morning after *The Tonight Show* aired as a separate clip from the episode itself. Currently, Hulu (of which, NBC Universal is a founding partner) and YouTube regularly feature segments from late-night talk shows (both legally and illegally) that can be downloaded and/or streamed. A segment called “Evolution of Hip-Hop Dancing” from the first episode of *The Tonight Show* featuring new host Jimmy Fallon has garnered over twenty million views on YouTube as of this writing, more than the estimated eleven million who watched the show live on February 17, 2014.[20] NBC monetizes these clips via advertising revenue through each venue that airs the content. The viewer requires no context to watch these segments, and can find the clips days, months, or even years after they air. The segments also provide additional buzz for the programs, marketing the show to potential new viewers. Thus, late-night talk shows are valuable to the networks because of their lower costs, regular viewership, promotional opportunities, and their ability to adapt to the short-form viewing environment tied to new technologies.

As the broadcast networks have faced the continued erosion of viewership in the last two decades, each of these strengths of the late-night talk show have been the focus of new strategies in regard to the prime time schedule and its associated content. In the contemporary environment, the television industry is facing large-scale changes in terms of the technologies available for consumers to view content, the production and financing structure that supports television programming, the distribution methods and outlets utilized for TV series, and the mechanisms used to measure television viewership.[21] Networks and production companies provide online content from apps to webisodes to behind-the-scenes footage to keep viewers engaged with their programming at all times, on all devices. Product placement and integration has increased dramatically in sitcoms and dramas both to supplement production budgets and to aid advertisers’ access to audiences. In 2007, the industry adopted the C3 ratings standard that measures the number of live viewers plus viewers within three days who watched the commercials in order to account for timeshifted viewing via the DVR. Separate ratings mechanisms now track viewing via Hulu and other websites, video-on-demand services, and iTunes. Media scholar Amanda Lotz claims that these changes contribute to an environment where “post-network television is primarily non-linear rather than linear,” with fewer and fewer viewers watching television programs in their original, live airing.[22] Thus, traditional programming practices—such as relying on strong lead-ins to help the ratings of later programs—are rendered less effective in such an environment.



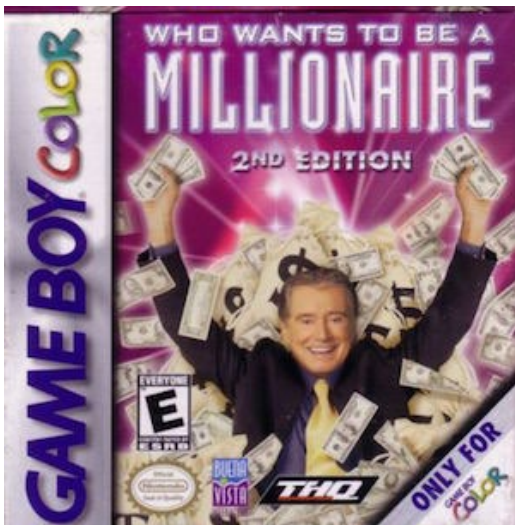
Like many reality shows, NBC’s *The Biggest Loser* provides ample opportunities for

One of the few types of prime time programming that has flourished on the broadcast networks in the post-network environment despite these challenges is reality television. As DVR penetration continues to grow, reality shows are among the least timeshifted programs and are less likely to be watched through video-on-demand or online sites such as Hulu.[23] Over the past few years, reality shows such as CBS’s *Survivor*, ABC’s *Dancing with the Stars* (2005-

sponsorship and product placement. For example, contestants can train at a 24-Hour Fitness center, which easily fits into the weight loss narrative of the program.



Using well-known television personality Regis Philbin as its host, ABC launched *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* as a limited summer series in 1999. Its popularity led to a November Sweeps period run and then a permanent place on ABC's prime-time schedule.



One of the video game iterations of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*

present), and Fox's *American Idol* (2002-present) have been among the highest rated programs in prime time television. These programs are typically cheaper to produce as they use much less above-the-line talent and smaller union crews by instead focusing on regular individuals and contestants. They feature lower production values, such as handheld cameras and natural lighting. They are also quicker to develop than fictional programming, and can thus fill gaps easier in a network's schedule if the need arises. Episode lengths can be shortened or lengthened, depending on the network's need. Multiple episodes can air in the same week when necessary. They are often easy to format, either through providing a solid base for spin-offs and copycat ideas or as a new source of revenue if picked up in other international markets.[24] Product placement and integration can blend seamlessly into the program's narrative. Reality television and game shows particularly fit into the summer programming schedule of the networks, which still need original content when there are fewer viewers available and they face strong competitors in original cable series.

As an early example of this trend, ABC's reliance on the British formatted game show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* (hereafter, *WWTBAM*) is a case in point. Debuting in August 1999 with television personality Regis Philbin as host, the show was stripped for two weeks in ABC's prime time schedule. *WWTBAM* won its time slot in total viewers each of the thirteen nights it was on the air that month.[25] As a result of its success, ABC executives decided to strip the show again, this time during the crucial November sweeps period when networks and stations try to maximize the number of viewers in order to secure higher advertising rates. Regarding the unusual move, Stu Bloomberg, the co-chairman of the ABC Entertainment Television Group at the time, claimed:

"We've captured lightning in a bottle with this show, and we intend to take full advantage of it." [26]

WWTBAM was showcased on eighteen nights during November, and it continued to be a ratings winner. The show propelled ABC to its first sweeps win in the 18-49 demographic since November 1994.[27] By the end of the month, it was announced that *WWTBAM* would become a regular series on the network's schedule starting in January.

Receiving nearly \$300,000 per 30-second spot, *WWTBAM* alone accounted for 25% of ABC's advertising revenues during the 1999-2000 television season.[28] AT&T sponsored the Phone-a-Friend segment used by some contestants, adding to the program's overall ad revenue. With the network boasting some \$200 million in profits, *WWTBAM* not only changed ABC's fortunes, but also contributed significantly to the profitability of its parent company, Disney, as it added \$6 billion in value that year.[29] As the show became more popular, spin-off products began to emerge, including board and video games. The other networks developed their own game shows in order to compete with the success of *WWTBAM*; for example, Fox added *Greed* to its schedule in 1999 and NBC revived the classic game show, *Twenty One*, in 2000, neither of which lasted more than a season. In a February 2000 article for *Newsweek*, writer Johnnie L. Roberts claimed that this was all part of the phenomenon dubbed the "Millionaire" effect, a transformation of the entire prime time landscape into game shows and other cheaper fare.[30] After less than a year on the air, it seemed that *WWTBAM* had in fact altered scheduling and merchandising practices for TV programs, while at the same time it had lifted the fortunes of a struggling network.

By the fall of 2000, *WWTBAM* dominated ABC's schedule, airing four nights of the week. At the same time, the ratings for *WWTBAM* finally began to cool. In October, the show was down 25% with the 18-49 demographic.[31] As the traditional television season drew to a close with the May 2001 sweeps, ABC had dropped from first to fourth place in terms of the 18-49 demographic, with an

overall 30% decrease in these viewers.[32] By the fall of 2001, *WWTBAM* had been trimmed back to only two nights a week, where it continued to struggle. In March of 2002, in response to still more viewership declines, ABC executives claimed that the network needed to refocus. For example, Kevin Brockman, ABC's Senior Vice President of Entertainment Communications, told the press that the network had "lost our way," and that ABC would soon return to a schedule of "what traditionally made ABC a network." [33] By April 2002, *WWTBAM* was down to airing one night per week before it was finally cancelled as a regular prime time series at the end of the season, though it has been brought back several times since as part of special event programming for the network and it remains on the air during daytime hours as a syndicated series. ABC finished the 2001-2002 television season again in fourth place in the 18-49 demographic, down 18% from the previous year.[34]

ABC's stripping of *WWTBAM* in prime time was seen as a key culprit in the network's precipitous decline. What started off as a fairly sound strategy—increasing the number of episodes per week of its most important and profitable program—quickly backfired on the network. In a fake obituary for the program published in the *New York Times*, writer Bill Carter claimed,

"The cause of death was complete exhaustion, compounded by overexposure to harsh competitive elements."

Indeed, Carter cites that at the same time ABC executives expanded *WWTBAM* to four nights a week, they had slashed the development budget for new series, leaving the network with few options to replace the game show once it began to falter. In Carter's piece, Michael Davies, an executive producer for *WWTBAM*, claimed that because it was such a risk for the network,

"I don't think we'll see anything like it again." [35]

Programming one series that took up the majority of a network's prime time schedule seemed unthinkable as a result of the waning ratings experienced by *WWTBAM* and the effect it had on ABC's overall health. It would take nearly a decade and another faltering network to prove Davies wrong.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



The Cosby Show debuted on NBC in September 1984 as the lead-off program to the prime time lineup on Thursday evenings. During its eight seasons in that spot, it was among the top ten highest rated programs every year but its last, and ranked as the highest rated show for five of its seasons. It was a central program in NBC's dominance throughout the 1980s.



ER debuted in the 10 PM Thursday slot in September 1994. For its first five seasons, it ranked as either the top rated or second rated show on network television. It contributed to NBC's top-rated network status for much of the 1990s, and remained on the air in that slot for fifteen years.

The “Killer App”: why NBC needed *The Jay Leno Show*

NBC was the dominant network with the 18-49 demographic during the 1980s and 1990s and even into the new millennium. Its Must-See TV lineup on Thursday nights established a number of hit sitcoms—including *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992), *Seinfeld* (1990-1998), and *Friends* (1994-2004)—as well as a record-breaking drama, *E.R.* (1994-2009), which topped the Nielsen ratings for many years. As media scholar Amanda Lotz outlines in “Must-See TV: NBC's Dominant Decades,” NBC experienced two waves of success in the last stages of the network era. The first occurred from 1985-1991, and the second from 1995-2003. In both waves, NBC's success with more upscale, college-educated viewers in the 18-49 demographic proved to be unmatched by any other broadcast or cable network.

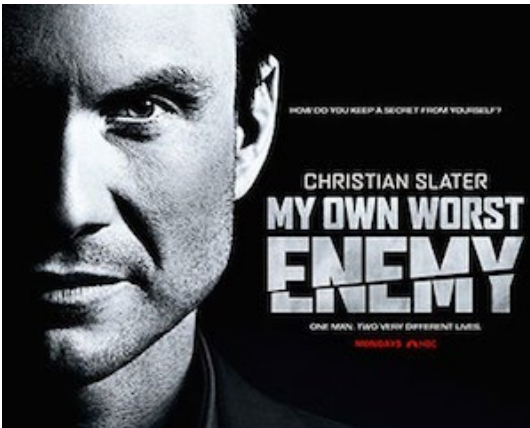
But, in both cases, popular series aged without new hits replacing them, and executives started to scramble.^[36][\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Particularly as the second wave ended, executives put cheap reality shows on NBC's schedule such as the gross-out competition program *Fear Factor* (2001-2006) and ugly-duckling dating show *Average Joe* (2003-2005). Neither of these reality shows meshed with the brand which had been cultivated by NBC for the past two decades. By the end of the TV season in 2004, NBC had landed in fourth place with the 18-49 demographic and remained mired there for the next eight years.

Although the network struggled across its entire prime time schedule, NBC's particular Achilles heel proved to be its 10 PM dramas. The 10 PM hour is an especially important part of the prime time schedule; it offers the last lead-in to the local news for the network's affiliates. Without a valuable boost from the lead-in show, a local news broadcast can suffer as viewers switch to another network (and therefore, possibly watch a competitor's local newscast) or simply just turn the television off. It is also the hour that cable networks often target with new, acclaimed, and/or controversial programming, further drawing away viewers from the broadcast networks and their affiliate stations. All of NBC's 10 PM programs averaged below a 3 rating in the 18-49 demographic during the 2008-2009 season, except one: *Law and Order: SVU* (1999-present), which averaged just above that mark with a 3.3.^[37] The Christian Slater vehicle, *My Own Worst Enemy* (2008), was pulled off the air after only nine episodes with a lowly 2.0 ratings average in the Monday 10 PM slot. Nor was it even the lowest rated 10 PM program for NBC; Wednesday night's *Lipstick Jungle* (2008-2009) averaged only a 1.5 rating, as did Friday night news staple *Dateline* (1992-present). As the 2008-2009 season ended, NBC was also losing its stalwart, *E.R.*, which was finally going off the air after fifteen years in the Thursday 10 PM slot.

It was clear that NBC had a massive problem on its hands—how to develop at least five new dramas for its key 10 PM hour efficiently and



As NBC began to struggle, it placed a number of cheaply produced reality shows in prime time, including *Fear Factor* (2001-2006). The image of contestants (here, artist Coolio) doused with crawling bugs contrasted with the upscale brand the network had previously cultivated.



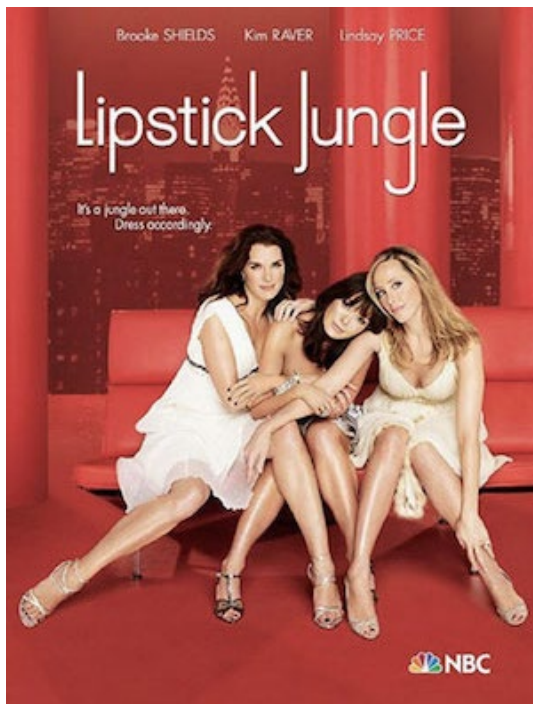
NBC had high expectations for the show based on Slater's movie star history, but it was cancelled in November 2008 after four episodes aired because of extremely low ratings. However, NBC did air five more episodes to honor advertising commitments.

effectively? At the same time, the network faced a pressing issue with late-night star Jay Leno. In September 2004, NBC executives announced that Leno would leave *The Tonight Show* in 2009 and Conan O'Brien would then take over the late-night franchise. During this renegotiation of both late-night hosts' contracts, the agreed upon date was cited as a preemptive move to keep O'Brien, who had serious inquiries from other networks to mount a competing late-night talk show, with NBC. With Leno's viewers growing older, out of the advertiser friendly 18-49 demographic, NBC also needed someone who could attract a younger audience. Although Leno had put a positive spin about his retirement in the press, behind closed doors it was rumored that he was not ready to leave his position. As his retirement date drew closer, he was more certain, especially since he continued to dominate the late-night ratings. He, too, received inquiries about jumping networks and mounting a new late-night talk show. NBC executives did not want to lose Leno, but would be in breach of contract with O'Brien if they reneged.

Thus, the stripping of *The Jay Leno Show* was viewed as a viable solution to two of NBC's most pressing problems—its failure in the 10 PM hour and its potential loss of Leno. Yet, *The Jay Leno Show* had a number of other advantages for NBC. First, the cost of mounting five episodes of a talk show were much cheaper than developing, producing and marketing five dramatic series for that hour, particularly given the high failure rate of television series. As a result of Leno's history with the network and *The Tonight Show*, marketing costs were less than it would have been for launching five separate new series. While the marketing expenditure for *The Jay Leno Show* was quite large at a rumored \$10 million, that budget covered five nights of prime time programming.[38]

In comparison, the pilot episode of NBC's drama *Undercovers* (2010) alone cost the same amount to produce and that does not even include the costs incurred by NBC to promote the new program, nor its additional production costs per episode.[39] If the average rate per episode of a drama in 2009 was \$3 million, and the network needed at least five new dramatic series to fill out its prime time schedule in the 10 PM hour, NBC's expenditure was going to be quite large just to fill that time slot five days a week.[40] In addition, the majority of NBC's prime time shows are produced through its corporate brethren, Universal Media Studios. For the fall 2009 season, all but one prime time program was produced in-house which means the costs, as well as the profits, remained within the larger media conglomerate.[41] It was predicted that if *The Jay Leno Show* averaged just a 1.5 rating with the 18-49 demographic, it would reap NBC \$300 million in profits, making it a potentially lucrative program.[42]

A second advantage of *The Jay Leno Show* in comparison to the typical 10 PM dramatic fare was the opportunities it produced for advertisers. For years, major advertisers have complained about the traditional broadcast schedule of twenty-two episodes a year of a program, leaving reruns and summers much less watched than original airings. Because the ratings were expected to be relatively low for *The Jay Leno Show*, advertising rates also were much lower than NBC's competitors in the same time slot. For example, on Thursday nights at 10 PM, ABC's going rate for a 30-second spot on *Private Practice* (2007-2013) was \$175,450 while CBS's going rate for *The Mentalist* (2008-present) was \$140,940. *The Jay Leno Show*'s average cost for a 30-second spot in the same slot was just



Lipstick Jungle was another 10 PM program that struggled with low ratings on the NBC schedule. It took over the Thursday spot when *ER* went off the air, and was moved across the schedule several times. Despite receiving two seasons, only 20 episodes were ever produced (less than a typical broadcast season schedule).



Although the change was announced in 2004, Conan O'Brien did not take over as host of *The Tonight Show* until June 2009. Leno was not ready to leave his hosting duties, however, and NBC executives did not want to lose him to another network.

\$57,295.[43] With forty-six weeks on the air (for a total of 230 episodes a year), *The Jay Leno Show* allowed advertisers to attach themselves to more original episodes. Since *The Jay Leno Show* would offer more original content per year, that lower price would be available when Jay Leno faced much less original competition and thus served as a potential bargain for advertisers if his ratings peaked above the network's guarantee.[44]

In addition to advantages to the advertisers during the show's breaks, *The Jay Leno Show* actively sought promotional partners for either recurring segments or for one-time sponsored segments. The most prominent of these partnerships was with Ford. The company sponsored the Green Car Challenge which featured a celebrity racing an electric Ford Focus around a track to achieve the quickest time. With the new show, Leno also created a new comedic segment, "Jay Uses Bing to Search the Internet," which features the Microsoft Bing search engine responding to random search terms with comedic responses. With its focus on Ford, Microsoft, and other sponsors, *The Jay Leno Show* within its first two weeks on air led the top shows with product placement, with over 184 occurrences—triple its nearest competitor.[45] By December, *The Jay Leno Show* was prime time television's clear leader in product placement with over 1,015 mentions tracked by Nielsen.[46] While Nielsen does not track whether the placement was paid or not (for example, a joke might be made in the monologue about McDonalds that is not paid for by the company), the results certainly demonstrated a program amenable to the inclusion of products.

A third advantage of *The Jay Leno Show* was that NBC executives viewed the program as "DVR-proof," a term Ben Silverman used to describe the program at the May 2009 Upfronts.[47] Skipping through commercials with the use of a DVR becomes less effective if advertisements are a part of the content itself. But beyond integrating advertisements into the show as done with Microsoft and Ford, executives like Silverman believed that viewers of *The Jay Leno Show* would prefer to watch the program live rather than recorded. The impact of the DVR on the 10 PM hour has been quite extraordinary. Not only are the 10 PM dramas competing with each other, they are also now competing with everything else recorded that evening, on any available channel. Nielsen research has revealed that only 27% of 10 PM shows that are recorded on DVRs are watched the same night they air as opposed to 53% of 8 PM shows and 42% of 9 PM shows.[48] At the announcement of *The Jay Leno Show* in December 2008, Silverman called the new program a "killer app," reasoning that "you want to watch it that night, and you want to watch it the next night" like you would *The Tonight Show* because of Leno's personality and his ripped from the day's headlines take on current affairs in the monologue.[49] It



A production of J.J. Abrams' Bad Robot, *Undercovers* was an expensive program for NBC. Abrams directed the pilot episode of the series, but it never received high ratings. It was cancelled after its eighth episode.



Tim Allen discusses the rules of the Green Car Challenge with Jay Leno. Ford sponsored this segment of the program, which featured a celebrity driving a new Ford Focus on an obstacle course trying to achieve the fastest time possible.



"Jay Uses Bing to Search the Internet" was another ad-supported recurring segment on *The Jay Leno Show*. Even the search terms themselves could provide additional product placement opportunities, as seen here with Pantene.

stood to reason that a viewer would prefer to watch the show live rather than record it and watch it later in the week when an event no longer seemed as timely.

Thus, *The Jay Leno Show* offered a number of benefits for the struggling network:

- it allowed NBC executives to keep a valuable personality;
- it cheaply filled a number of holes on the prime time schedule;
- it provided a number of opportunities to work with advertisers in new and more engaging ways; and
- it was viewed as the type of program that could combat the growing penetration of DVRs and the subsequent television viewing practices that accompanied the new technology.

While NBC executives were quite optimistic about the effect the program would have on the network, many television professionals, industry journalists, and media analysts believed that *The Jay Leno Show* was a harbinger of what was to come: the replacement of even more expensive, quality television series with cheaper, reality-based programming. It was the same feeling that emerged when *WWTBAM* became a ratings juggernaut for ABC—a sense of dread for the future of broadcast television. In their cover story on the prime time program, editors at *Time* magazine dubbed Jay Leno "the Future of Television. Seriously!" For many critics, though, it hardly seemed like a future to celebrate.

"The Future of Television": debates about the potential impact of *The Jay Leno Show*

The Jay Leno Show hit quite a nerve; the network's decision and what it indicated about the contemporary television landscape were widely debated in the popular and trade presses. In discussions about the show, many believed *The Jay Leno Show* would succeed because it was so cheap to make, had instant name recognition, and would not need to achieve the highest ratings to be profitable for the network. Executives at other networks, mainly ABC and CBS, were ecstatic to have one less significant competitor in the 10 PM hour. Writers, producers and showrunners were certainly worried what the future of the 10 PM drama would look like. Before the first episode even aired, *The Jay Leno Show* was defined as the future of broadcast television, and the implications of that future reverberated across the industry in myriad ways.

Like NBC, both ABC and CBS had suffered similar ratings woes for their 10 PM dramas. Although both networks featured major hits in the 9 PM hour, neither network had had much success piggybacking another drama off of a top-rated show. For example, CBS executives tried two different series after its Thursday mainstay *CSI* (2000-present) during the 2008-2009 season: *Eleventh Hour*, an adaptation of a successful British series that lasted less than twenty episodes; and *Harper's Ferry*, a horror/action



The September 14, 2009, cover of *Time* which claims that Leno “is the future of television.” *The Jay Leno Show* was discussed in a wide variety of publications over the nine months between the initial announcement and its September 2009 premiere date.



While CBS and ABC executives were pleased to have one less serious drama competitor in the 10 PM slot, both networks did not want their stars to visit *The Jay Leno Show* since their appearances could draw an audience away from their own network. Here, Julia Louis-Dreyfus circumvents the embargo by placing several “Watch CBS” signs on her body while promoting *The New Adventures of Old Christine* (2006-2010).

hybrid that lasted only thirteen episodes. Since Fox provided no national broadcasting during the 10 PM hour and NBC would have *The Jay Leno Show*, executives at ABC and CBS saw the level of competition dwindle significantly in that timeslot. Indeed, executives for CBS teamed up with representatives from its major affiliates to launch “Project L.E.N.O.” as an initiative to aggressively promote the 10 PM hour. Although executives denied that L.E.N.O. stood for Leno (rather, it stood for Late Enhanced prime News Opportunity), all of the network’s co-op money was being using to specifically target the 10 PM hour in the fall.[50] For both ABC and CBS, the 10 PM hour became a top priority.

With one less network to finance and develop dramas in that time slot, however, showrunners, producers, and writers were much more incensed about the stripping of *The Jay Leno Show*. For some talent, it seemed an admission that NBC executives could not figure out the complexities of the new television landscape. Quipped Peter Tolan, the showrunner for FX’s *Rescue Me* (2004-2011):

“I feel they should take down their American flag and put up a white one. . . . They’ve clearly given up.”[51]

For others, it demonstrated the end of the quality television legacy that NBC had fostered for decades. Claimed Shawn Ryan, showrunner of FX’s *The Shield* (2002-2008) and Fox’s *Lie to Me* (2009-2010):

“[T]hat used to be a special network. *L.A. Law*, *Hill Street Blues*, *The Cosby Show*, *ER*, *Friends* and *Seinfeld*—there was a whole generation of us that this was the network you turned on first. It’s just sad.”[52]

Many worried about the future of the dramatic series on broadcast television and whether ABC, CBS, and Fox would soon follow suit with similar programming strategies. Argued Laura Caraccioli-Davis, an Executive Vice President at Starcom Entertainment:

“It may just get too expensive to continue with the checkerboard model. . . .Every network. . .is looking for creative, cost-controlling scheduling opportunities.”[53]

Rather than continue to fill every time slot with expensive original series, *The Jay Leno Show* portended more cheap programming across the networks’ prime time schedules.

Given the challenges facing the broadcast television networks—the inundation from cable competition, viewers watching programs through technologies such as the DVR, and the migration of program watching to the Web—it was clear that the broadcast model was in serious need of an overhaul. Yet, many debated whether *The Jay Leno Show* was even the right direction for a network to take in order to face these challenges. After all, a stripped program in prime time hours had not been successful in U.S. television over the long-term. The last program to try something similar—ABC’s *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*—quickly lost its stellar ratings when its presence was increased to four nights a week on the prime time schedule, a decision that affected the network’s overall ad revenue negatively. While it lacked a successful precedent, *The Jay Leno Show* hardly featured the characteristics that made contemporary television series profitable either. Stressed showrunner Shawn Ryan about why *The Jay Leno Show* would ultimately be a failure:

Say Good-Bye to CBS?



Time Warner Cable is threatening to hold your favorite TV shows hostage and drop CBS.

This is not an empty threat as proven by their track record. Time Warner Cable has dropped nearly 50 channels in the last 5 years.

CBS has never been dropped by a cable company before.

CBS is working in good faith to resolve this issue.

In fact, we have reached fair agreements with every other distributor in the country—including AT&T, Cablevision, Charter, Comcast, DirecTV, Dish and Verizon.

Keeping You Informed

We want you to know that Time Warner Cable may disrupt your CBS viewing as early as this week.

For information on how you can keep CBS
www.KeepCBS.com
(855) 345-KEEP

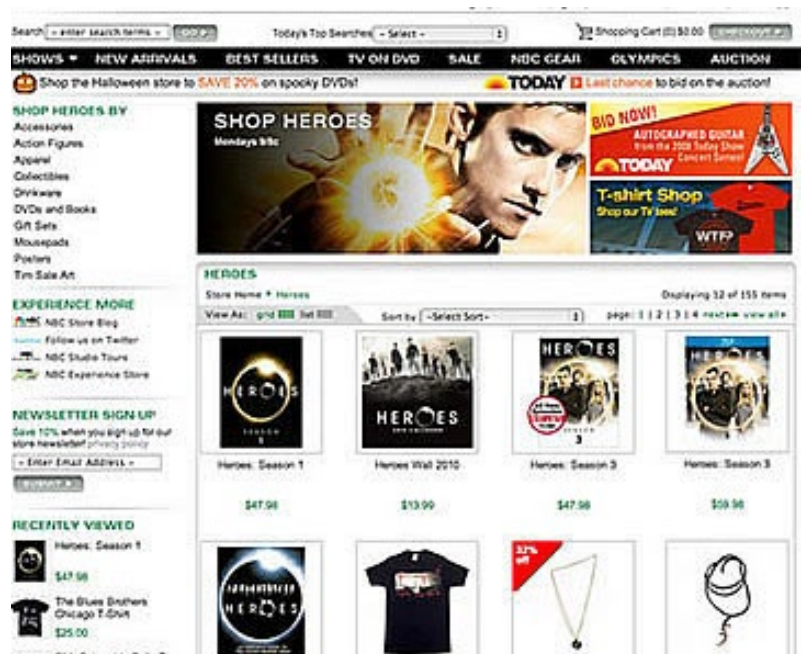
CBS has with increased frequency gotten into disputes with cable and satellite providers over subscription fees to carry the network, as it did with Time Warner in 2013. These disputes center on increasing the compensation the network receives, and indicate a move away from relying on their affiliates for national coverage.

“What’s the value of the show after it airs? . . . *Heroes* is very expensive to make, but it has value all across the world. There’s a reason they’re in [the drama] business—when it works, they make a lot of money.”[54]

Indeed, a program such as *Heroes* (2006-2010) was one of the few bright spots NBC had experienced while it had been the fourth place broadcast network. Although cancelled at the end of the 2009-2010 season, at its height *Heroes* achieved a lot for the troubled network, including:

- it spawned tie-in comic books, T-shirts, trading cards, and other assorted merchandise;
- it was licensed in over 150 countries, a feat accomplished within a year of its premiere;
- it had sold for \$300,000 an episode in syndication on the G4 network in its second year on the air; and
- its first season DVD alone generated over \$45 million in sales in its first eight weeks of availability in the domestic marketplace.[55]

Unlike this blockbuster series, *The Jay Leno Show* offered few opportunities for tie-ins and assorted merchandise, little chance for syndication or licensing in overseas markets, and no after-market potential through DVD sales.



While NBC was struggling with its overall viewership, it did have a huge hit with *Heroes* (2006-2010). In addition to big weekly ratings, *Heroes* also inspired myriad merchandizing opportunities because of its focus on superheroes. T-shirts, action figures, DVDs, posters, and comic books are just some of the products that became available during the series’ height via NBC’s website.

In all of the discussion about *The Jay Leno Show* and what it might indicate about the future of television if it proved successful, the impact the show might have on local stations was rarely mentioned in the press. Tied to the traditional broadcasting model, the affiliate stations’ role in

the post-network television environment remains unclear. Journalists and media scholars have discussed how the power of the affiliates has been severely curtailed in the contemporary broadcast environment. For example, media scholar Amanda Lotz contends in *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* that

“new distribution methods are not only eroding the network-affiliate structure that characterized the network era and multi-channel transition, but also [are] leading some to suggest that there may be little need for local affiliates in a post-network era since a near national audience can be reached by cable or satellite, and perhaps someday, the Internet.”[56]

Indeed, as the broadcast networks continue to argue for increased retransmission fees from cable operators, some media analysts see the big four soon shifting to more of a cable economic model. One such indication of the adoption of this model is the deal CBS signed with Comcast in 2010 that gave the network approximately fifty cents per subscriber per month beginning in 2012, a figure that continually increases over the ten-year span of the contract.[57] If the broadcast networks eschewed the affiliate model and moved to the cable financing model, each of the big four would be able to command subscriber fees close to the \$4.00 per month that the highest paid cable network, ESPN, currently receives given their larger base of viewers and name recognition.[58]

Within the contemporary television landscape, then, local stations are rarely seen as impacting the fortunes of a broadcast network. The first press accounts of the affiliate/network relationship being in jeopardy as a result of *The Jay Leno Show* appeared when the Sunbeam-owned Boston NBC affiliate announced in April 2009 that they would not air the program and would instead produce a 10 PM local newscast. Claimed Ed Ansin, the chief of Sunbeam:

“We don’t think the Leno show is going to be effective in primetime. . . .It will be detrimental to our 11 o’clock [newscast]. It will be very adverse to our finances.”[59]

NBC and Boston Station Spar Over Leno

By BILL CARTER
Published: April 3, 2009

NBC had a message for its affiliated station in Boston on Friday: take Jay or go away.

In April 2009, Ed Ansin, the chief executive officer for Sunbeam Broadcasting, announced that its

Boston NBC affiliate would not air *The Jay Leno Show* during the 10 PM hour. Ansin believed it would be a poor lead-in to his 11 PM news, and determined that *The Jay Leno Show* would be “very adverse to our finances.”

Within two weeks of the announcement, though, the Boston affiliate backed down and agreed to run the programming as scheduled. Rumors floated that NBC’s general counsel had threatened to turn its owned and operated (O&O) Telemundo station into a new NBC affiliate in Boston and that the company had registered a new domain name for this exact purpose.[60] At the same time, NBC executives highlighted in the press how *The Jay Leno Show* would save some of Leno’s most well-known bits, such as Headlines, until the end of the program so the viewer would (presumably) stick around for the local news. By June, this affiliate crisis seemed to be over as no other affiliates publicly spoke out about the programming strategy, prompting *Variety* columnist Brian Lowry to surmise, “It’s No Longer the Affiliates’ Ballgame.” In his piece, Lowry viewed the fundamental network/affiliate relationship as one of uneven power:

“The days of affiliates exerting substantial sway over network programming decisions have largely dissipated, amid shifting priorities by corporate parents and a troubled economy that has drained local stations’ coffers and thus much of their clout.”[61]

Until after the show premiered, Lowry’s was the last major article to discuss the affiliates and the potential impact of *The Jay Leno Show* on their revenue models.

With all of the discussion about *The Jay Leno Show* before it even premiered, it was clear that the show’s success was not only important for NBC’s fortunes, but also the (potential) fortunes of its chief competitors, the creative television community, as well as the larger television industry as a whole. But the network’s affiliated stations were positioned as having a minimal role in assessing the show’s overall performance. Nine months after the program was announced, *The Jay Leno Show* had a lot to prove when it went on the air after having been framed as “The Future of Television,” whether or not the outcome was viewed as positive. As a risky programming decision by NBC, however, the show turned out to have several unintentional effects, few of which were anticipated in the nearly year-long discussion of the program before its prime time debut.

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



The John Wells-produced *Southland* was a casualty of the stripped talk show. Despite a strong first season in ratings, NBC executives cancelled the show before the second season even aired because it no longer fit into their schedule. TNT picked up the rights, and aired the program for several more seasons. With the abrupt cancellation, NBC severed a very important relationship with Wells, who had several hits with the network including *ER*, *The West Wing* (1999-2006) and *Third Watch* (1999-2005).



Trauma was one of the new dramas NBC ordered for the 2009-2010 prime time lineup. It did not feature any well-known stars, but it did require expensive action scenes because of its focus on paramedics in San Francisco. It was

Determining the “Jay Leno Effect”

After being on the air for two weeks, several publications, including *Advertising Age* and the *New York Times*, returned to the debate about the potential effects of *The Jay Leno Show*. Leno’s ratings were not spectacular, but they were usually above the 1.5 rating the network had guaranteed advertisers and thus the show remained profitable. While Jeff Gaspin stressed to the press that “We’ll make money at 10 o’clock this year, I guarantee,” other aspects of NBC’s bottom line looked less assured.[62] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) The rest of NBC’s prime time schedule remained a mess; the network’s late-night ratings had declined sharply; and local affiliates saw a negative impact on their newscasts’ ratings. Although the wait and see strategy continued to be thrown out by NBC executives to the press, by October it was clear that the network was scrambling to fix the many unforeseen problems created by the stripped program.

Perhaps the first visible effect of *The Jay Leno Show* was the unexpected cancellation of *Southland* (2009-2013), the John Wells-produced drama set in the Los Angeles Police Department.[63] The first seven episodes of the series ran in the spring of 2009 at the 10 PM hour. After just a few of those episodes aired, NBC renewed the series for a second season. In August, with a month to go before the show’s second season premiere, NBC executives announced that they were moving back *Southland* until October in order to give it more of a marketing push. Then, on October 8, *Southland* was abruptly cancelled, despite having five episodes ready to air. Although not directly cited in any of the articles, journalists hinted that NBC executives found the content of the show to be too dark for a 9 PM time slot and finally gave up trying to schedule it. Wells, however, directly attacked the lack of prime time real estate left in NBC’s schedule for the show’s cancellation:

“I’m disappointed that NBC no longer has the time periods available to support the kind of critically-acclaimed series that was for so many years, a hallmark of their success.”[64]

With *Southland*’s cancellation, NBC severed its lengthy relationship with Wells, who served as an executive producer on several former NBC hits including *E.R.*, *Third Watch* (1999-2005), and *The West Wing* (1999-2006).

Not only did NBC face the fallout from the poor handling of *Southland*, but its other dramatic series were also suffering as a result of placement to earlier timeslots. *Law & Order: SVU* (1999-present) had habitually won its Tuesday 10 PM time slot in the past, but the show was moved to Wednesday at 9 PM to accommodate *The Jay Leno Show*. In its new timeslot, *Law & Order: SVU* regularly came in fourth place. In addition, neither of its two freshman dramatic series—*Trauma* (2009-2010) and *Mercy* (2009-2010)—had made any traction and were often last in their time periods. Like *Southland*, neither program had received much promotion as a result of the focus on *The Jay Leno Show*. In fact, NBC found that none of its dramas were doing well in the Nielsen ratings, many of which had been moved around or put into a too early time slot to accommodate the stripped schedule of the prime time talk show.

It was not only the dramatic series in prime time that were affected by *The Jay Leno Show*. With Jay Leno’s talk show available during prime time hours, NBC’s late-night programs also began to take a hit in the ratings, particularly Leno’s former home, *The Tonight Show*. When Conan O’Brien took over the late-night franchise in June 2009, audience shifting was expected. O’Brien started losing to David

often last in its time slot amongst the four broadcast networks.



In 2004, NBC announced that Conan O'Brien would take over hosting duties for *The Tonight Show* in five years. On June 1, 2009, O'Brien replaced Jay Leno as the show's host. While the ratings initially slipped with overall viewers, O'Brien regularly beat David Letterman in the 18-49 demographic until *The Jay Leno Show* premiered in September. At that point, O'Brien's viewership in all demographics began to noticeably decline.



Jimmy Fallon took over the 12:35 AM slot after *The Tonight Show* on March 2, 2009, replacing Conan O'Brien. Their main competitor in the time slot, Craig Ferguson on CBS, had never beaten either host's NBC show in the ratings until September 2009, when *The Jay Leno Show* started in prime time.

Letterman in terms of total viewers in the time slot, though O'Brien maintained a slight edge with the younger demographics. By the end of August 2009, O'Brien was still the leader in the 18-49 demographic by about 20%, while Letterman continued to win more viewers in total.[65]

After O'Brien's fall premiere a few weeks later, however, he started to slip. This fall premiere week was also the first week since *The Jay Leno Show* debuted that both Letterman and O'Brien had new episodes. For the fall premiere week, O'Brien's viewership was down 49% from the previous year (with Leno), and *The Tonight Show* lost to Letterman in three key categories that week—total viewers, adults 18-49, and adults 25-54—for the first time since 2005.[66] Over the next few months, O'Brien's ratings did not much improve with total viewers, although he remained competitive in the 18-49 demographic.

In addition to the ratings slip seen with *The Tonight Show*, *The Late Show with Jimmy Fallon* also saw significant drops. In the 12:35 PM timeslot, Fallon started losing viewers to CBS's *The Late Late Show with Craig Ferguson*. Until November 2009, Ferguson had never beat the NBC competition (whether O'Brien, in his former home, or Fallon) since he started hosting in 2005.[67] It was an ominous sign for NBC's late-night fortunes as O'Brien's troubles coincided with the premiere of *The Jay Leno Show*, and *The Tonight Show* started to provide a weak lead-in to *The Late Show with Jimmy Fallon*.

Overall, the performance of *The Jay Leno Show* most affected the NBC affiliates. For the first few months on air, the affiliates seemed to toe NBC's company line about *The Jay Leno Show*. A few weeks into the season, *Broadcasting and Cable* ran a story on the NBC affiliates with the headline "NBC Affiliates Okay on 'Jay' So Far." Most of the representatives cited in the article reinforced NBC's strategy that it was too early to tell, that the program needed long-term assessment. For example, Donita Todd, the Vice President and General Manager for NBC affiliate WIS in Columbia, South Carolina, claimed:

"The focus of this show is that it's a marathon, not a sprint. . . .It's a 52-week platform, and [Leno's] success is measured on how it does over the course of a year."[68]

In mid-October, Joe Flint of the *Los Angeles Times* wrote about the affiliates' growing woes with their 11 PM newscasts. Three station representatives were quoted in the article—one positive about Leno's impact, one quite negative, and one that again suggested it was too early to tell. Stated Jordan Wertlieb, the president and general manager of Baltimore affiliate WBAL:

"People want to declare the game over because we are down a couple of runs after the first inning. There is a long way to go. . . .We look at this as a 52-week strategy."[69]

A few weeks later, *Broadcasting and Cable* ran a second story on the NBC affiliates, "NBC Affiliates Standing By 'Jay Leno Show.'" Although the "Jay Leno Effect" is brought up in the article, most of the representatives quoted in the article again toe the company line of waiting for the results of the November sweeps. After all, argued the President and General Manager of the Cleveland NBC affiliate,

"It's still early—we haven't gotten the time change yet, and we haven't had the awful weather. It's always dangerous to make a statement before the weather gets ugly."[70]

After the sweeps period is over at the end of November, it is often the time of year that weather turns ugly. The sweeps—which occur four times during the year—are the key measurement months that determine how many viewers watched a network and how much the network and its affiliated stations can charge advertisers to reach those viewers. Ugly certainly describes the fortunes of a number of NBC affiliates in November 2009 as ratings were significantly down from the previous year. The rumored "Jay Leno Effect" was a clear fact by this point.

Leno Fallout

How the NBC late-night news in the top 10 markets fared following Jay Leno's 10 p.m. show, for viewers aged 25-54:

Market	Ratings change	Avg. weekly revenue change
New York	-47.6%	-\$158,355
Los Angeles	-42.9%	-\$112,639
Chicago	-32.4%	-\$97,124
Philadelphia	-46.9%	-\$73,842
Dallas	-11.5%	-\$12,921
San Francisco	-23.5%	-\$28,504
Boston	-32.0%	-\$38,372
Atlanta	-5.9%	-\$3,794
Washington, D.C.	-25.0%	-\$42,305
Houston	-36.0%	-\$49,951

Note: November 2009 vs. November 2008 Source: Harmelin Media

A number of local stations experienced drops of twenty percent or more in their 11 PM news ratings with *The Jay Leno Show* as a lead-in. Termed “the Jay Leno effect,” the resulting loss of advertising revenue was a big factor in these stations pushing for the show’s cancellation.

From the previous November, NBC stations suffered massive drops in viewership: Washington, D.C. down by 25%; Chicago down by 32.4%; Los Angeles down by 42.9%; and New York down by 47.6% to name but a few.[71] Several of these cities represented NBC’s O&O stations, which certainly impacted the company’s own advertising revenues.[72] By the end of December, as many as one-third of NBC affiliates threatened to preempt *The Jay Leno Show*. [73] On January 7, 2010, NBC issued a press release claiming that *The Jay Leno Show* was not cancelled; indeed, the release assured,

“Jay Leno is one of the most compelling entertainers in the world today. As we have said all along, Jay’s show has performed exactly as we anticipated on the network. It has, however, presented some issues for our affiliates.”[74]

Yet, three days later, NBC issued another press release: the program was in fact cancelled. In the release, Jeff Gaspin stressed,

“While performing at acceptable levels for the network, it did not meet our affiliate needs.”[75]

The failed programming experiment

In the fallout from the removal of *The Jay Leno Show* from NBC’s prime time schedule, three key lessons emerged from the wreckage. First, despite the limited focus by the press on the affiliates before *The Jay Leno Show* premiered, they ended up being the most important component affecting NBC’s business strategy. When *The Jay Leno Show* was announced in December 2008, Jeffrey Zucker, the President and Chief Executive Officer of NBC Universal, emphasized that the program was an attempt to change the way broadcast networks operate:

“We do have to continue to rethink what a broadcast network is. . . . [Or] the broadcast networks will end up like the newspaper business or, worse, like the car companies.”[76]

As much as the post-network television business is evolving, it is key that NBC executives chose to stick with a base of the old model—the network affiliates—even



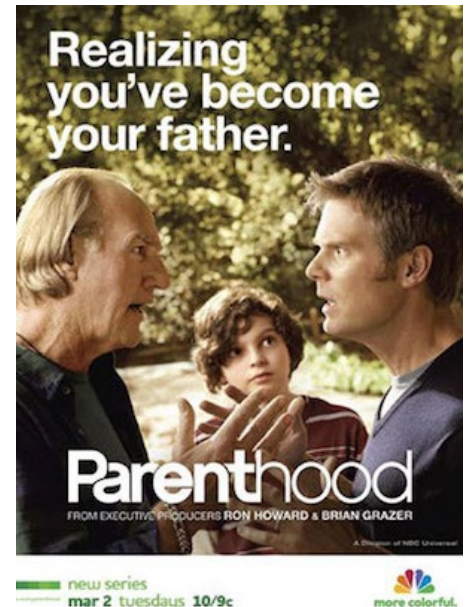
The last episode of *The Jay Leno Show* aired February 9, 2010. Leno's monologue and several taped segments were self-effacing. A number of celebrities came on the program to highlight what a disaster the prime time experiment had been. For example, Donald Trump via a live television feed told Leno "You're fired," a nod to his trademarked line on NBC's *The Apprentice*.

though a new model—the stripping of a cheaply produced program—was profitable for the network itself. As such, the cancellation of the show demonstrated that the reliance on affiliates is still central to how the broadcast networks view their current business models.

Second, despite the struggles currently facing the 10 PM hour, the failure of *The Jay Leno Show* indicated that a quality dramatic series is still an important lead-in for the local news. One of the few rookie series to perform well in the 2009-2010 season was CBS's Tuesday 10 PM-scheduled *The Good Wife* (2009-present), which averaged over thirteen million viewers per week.[77] Indeed, CBS's improved track record with the 10 PM hour in the fall of 2009 against Leno led to a 15% ratings increase in its affiliates' local news markets.[78] *The Good Wife*'s performance certainly contributed to these local affiliates' ratings increases.



CBS's *The Good Wife* (2009-present) was a huge hit in its Tuesday 10 PM time slot during the 2009-2010 season against *The Jay Leno Show*. As a strong lead-in, it helped CBS affiliates experience ratings increases in many markets around the United States.



One of the replacements for *The Jay Leno Show* in the 10 PM timeslot was *Parenthood* (2010-present). Based on a hit 1989 movie, the program featured a number of known TV stars including Peter Krause (HBO's *Six Feet Under*), Lauren Graham (The WB's *Gilmore Girls*) and Craig T. Nelson (ABC's *Coach*). It dramatically increased the ratings experienced by *The Jay Leno Show*.

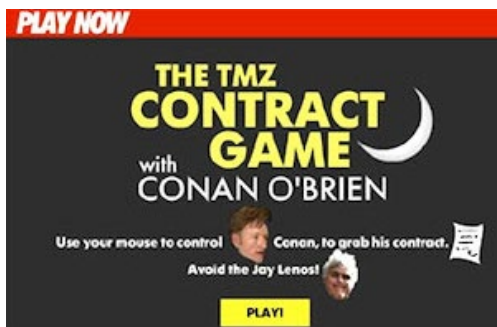
One of NBC's replacements for the cancelled *The Jay Leno Show* was *Parenthood* (2010-present), an adaptation of the popular Ron Howard-directed film. Although only watched by an average of 6 million viewers per week, *Parenthood* did well in the 18-49 demographic and received a 2.6 rating/7 share in the Tuesday 10 PM time slot.[79] Based on its short-run performance, *Parenthood* received an order for a second season. In all, viewership was up 50% on NBC for the 10 PM hour when the network returned to airing dramatic series in March.[80] In fact, NBC scheduled four new dramas for the 10 PM hour the next season, clearly reversing its programming strategy from *The Jay Leno Show* the year prior.

	monday	tuesday	wednesday	thursday	friday	saturday	sunday
7:00							
7:30							football night in america 7:00-8:15p
8:00	 chuck	 the event	 chuck	 community	 school pride	 chuck	
8:30	 chuck	 the event	 chuck	 30 rock	 who do you think you are	 chuck	
9:00	 the event	 the biggest loser	 the event	 the office	 dateline nbc	 the event	
9:30	 the event	 the biggest loser	 the event	 outsourced	 dateline nbc	 the event	
10:00	 chase	 parenthood	 chase	 love bites	 outlaw	 chase	
10:30	 chase	 parenthood	 chase	 love bites	 outlaw	 chase	

The Fall 2010 schedule for NBC features four new dramas in the 10 PM slot vacated by *The Jay Leno Show*. None of those shows lasted more than a season.

Finally, the most important and long-term impact of *The Jay Leno Show* was on late-night talk show programming. When Gaspin announced the demise of the prime time program, rumors circulated that an 11:35 PM spot would be made for Leno to do a half-hour show to lead-in to O'Brien and *The Tonight Show*, which would be then bumped to 12:05 AM. However, O'Brien took his disapproval of NBC executives' new strategy to the public, suggesting that these executives

“decided to react to their terrible difficulties in prime time by making a change in their long-established late night schedule.”[81]



Over the next few weeks, O'Brien and Leno took moments in their monologues to eviscerate each other; executives shifted the focus of NBC's overall troubles to O'Brien; and viewers tuned in to see the melee unfold. Ultimately, O'Brien stepped down as host of *The Tonight Show* on January 22, 2010, and Jay Leno returned as host on March 1, 2010.

Both *The Tonight Show* franchise and Leno's image were tarnished by all of the ugliness. Comedic bits by fellow late-night hosts such as Jimmy Kimmel, David Letterman, and Craig Ferguson painted Leno as a greedy, mean-spirited, unfunny host. When Leno returned to late-night in March, surveys demonstrated a huge increase in the number of people who looked at him unfavorably.[82] Leno's ratings did not best O'Brien's numbers for *The Tonight Show* for his first few months back and *The Tonight Show* suffered its worst summer ever in the program's long history.

As the fight for *The Tonight Show* between Leno and Conan got more heated, mainstream and

online sources often painted Leno as the bad guy. This TMZ game required you to move Conan towards his contract by using your mouse before Leno touched you and you lost hosting duties. Available at: <http://www.tMZ.com/2010/01/11/the-conan-obrien-contract-game/>



For the entirety of the January 12, 2010, episode of his ABC late-night show, Jimmy Kimmel impersonated Jay Leno. He made fun of his typical segments, such as “Headlines,” and even the way Leno speaks. Two days later, Kimmel appeared on a segment of *The Jay Leno Show* where he continued to hurl insults at Leno for the debacle with Conan. For example, “Listen, Jay, Conan and I have children....All you have to take care of is cars...We have lives to lead here. You have \$800 million. For God’s sake, leave our shows alone!”



In early 2013, rumors began to circulate that Jimmy Fallon would take over *The Tonight Show* from Leno within the year. A video ran between the two shows on April 1, 2013, where the two men sing a version of *West Side Story*’s “Tonight” about the ongoing shuffle of the late-night program. Referencing Fallon’s appeal in the younger demos and Leno’s ratings, it was an attempt to show that the two sides were civil in the ongoing debate about who would host the show.

[83] By December 2010, Leno’s ratings were near, or beating, O’Brien’s numbers as *The Tonight Show* host, but they were a long way from the ratings he achieved before he left. By August 2012, his viewership was still down over 25% percent from before his prime time program, and the viewership numbers were so dire at *The Tonight Show* that Leno had to take a 20% pay cut and layoff several staff members.[84] Over the next two years until he retired from *The Tonight Show* (again), the numbers only approached his pre-*The Jay Leno Show* ratings on special occasions such as in the week-long buildup to his final episode in February 2014.

In addition to the hit the viewership took on *The Tonight Show*, this latest late-night war led to yet another competitor. Although Fox executives and O’Brien had several discussions about launching a late-night talk show on the network, the deal ultimately stalled when the network could not get all of the clearances with its affiliates. Again, this was another indication of the continued reliance on affiliation as the primary business model for broadcast networks. O’Brien ultimately chose to create a late-night program with TBS. Although a cable network, TBS at the time featured the late-night talk show with the youngest average audience, *Lopez Tonight* (2009-2011).

Before O’Brien’s TBS show, *Conan*, even premiered in November 2010, 30-second commercials were fetching between \$30,000 and \$40,000, rates that were very close to those of Leno’s and Letterman’s programs since TBS was already the number one cable network in the 18-34 demographic.[85] Given that cable is not available in every U.S. household, there was little chance that *Conan* would ever beat Leno in total viewers, but he only needed to reach a 0.5 rating in the 18-49 demographic to be considered profitable for the network.[86] Now, as a result of the fracas over *The Tonight Show*, the broadcast networks’ late-night programs had a viable competitor on cable, particularly for the demographic most prized by advertisers. Thus, the “Jay Leno Effect” was not just on NBC’s prime time schedule or on the affiliate stations, but also on the late-night landscape.

Unlike most television series failures, *The Jay Leno Show* left an indelible mark on NBC’s programming strategies and provided several lessons about the contemporary television landscape. In the press, *The Jay Leno Show* was often described as an experiment and while it proved to be a failure, it reiterated the continued reliance on the affiliates, the viability of the 10 PM drama, and the importance of the late-night talk show. Perhaps its most enduring lesson, though, is about the price of taking risks.

While using star power and a proven genre hardly seem like risky moves, the fact that NBC executives decided to strip *The Jay Leno Show* in prime time clearly showed a rare form of risk-taking with the broadcast schedule. Given all of the challenges the broadcast networks currently face, new types of programs and new approaches to programming are overdue. While this particular risk might not have paid off for the network, it clearly was an attempt to shift the nature of what constituted prime time broadcast television. Asked about whether *The Jay Leno Show* had been worth it to NBC, Gaspin replied:

“I don’t think it’s wrong to take chances. . . . Sometimes they work, sometimes they don’t. Maybe we were a little too early on [in reinventing the 10 p.m. hour]. I still think you have to play with your schedule a little bit differently. . . . By the fall, you may see us do some interesting stuff with the schedule.”[87]

Perhaps he was right and it was too early for this type of experiment. While making some strides away from the broadcast model that has defined television for decades, it was clear from the cancellation of *The Jay Leno Show* that NBC was not ready to eschew that model entirely.

Gaspin’s quote, taken from an article in January 2010 when *The Jay Leno Show* had just been cancelled, hinted at a continued playing around with the schedule for the fall 2010 season. But perhaps the “Jay Leno Effect” had more impact than he cared to admit. At the May 2010 Upfronts, NBC released its first post-*The Jay Leno Show*



As Conan O'Brien and Jay Leno traded barbs about the fate of *The Tonight Show*, fans showed support for Team Coco (O'Brien's nickname) by updating their Facebook and Twitter images. Rallies were also held in front of NBC studios, where fans marched with the "I'm with Coco" sign.



Conan's late-night program premiered on TBS in November 2010, about nine months after Leno resumed the hosting duties of *The Tonight Show*.

schedule. A number of new series were lined up—including *The Event* (2010), a serialized drama heavily influenced by ABC's popular hit *Lost* (2004–2010), and *Undercovers*, a spy series from executive producer J.J. Abrams of *Lost* fame. However, NBC's schedule hardly had the edge of a year prior. Spinoffs of established series, prominent producers, crime procedurals—with that risk-taking impulse out of its system, NBC's schedule looked like every other season, every other broadcast network. NBC executives had learned a valuable lesson. Mimic the successful programming seen on the other broadcast networks rather than significantly alter the prime time schedule. At the Upfronts in May 2010, Gaspin noted the new direction of NBC's schedule was a direct result of *The Jay Leno Show*'s aftermath:

"The thing that we learned from this year is that if you're going to compete at 10 o'clock, you have to put your best content on. . . . There's too much competition from cable and from DVR's." [88]

None of these attempts succeeded, as each of these programs struggle to find ratings in the 18–49 demographic. In the aftermath of the failed *The Jay Leno Show*, NBC remained the fourth-placed broadcast network for the next few years, unable to successfully negotiate the larger forces impacting the broadcast television industry.

While *The Jay Leno Show* was ultimately a failure, it did provide a sense of the type of program that could succeed for NBC in the post-network environment—a well-tested format that featured big named talent and took up several timeslots on the weekly schedule. In that regard, *The Voice* (2011–present) had many similarities to *The Jay Leno Show*. Based on a highly successful Dutch television series, *The Voice* debuted on NBC in April 2011 to huge ratings, particularly in the 18–49 demographic. Promotions highlighted the big stars—CeeLo Green, Blake Shelton, Christina Aguilera, and Adam Levine—attached to the singing competition show. Airing in blocks on Monday and Tuesday nights, *The Voice* filled several timeslots that had been previously vulnerable for NBC. It also earned respectable ratings in reruns on Saturday nights. The last third of the competition episodes aired live, which encouraged live viewing rather than timeshifting via DVR.

But that is where the similarities end. Unlike *The Jay Leno Show* which was meant to keep development and production costs down for the struggling network, executives at NBC used the success of *The Voice* as an investment in dramatic programming. Weeks after *The Voice* premiered, NBC Universal chief executive officer Steve Burke assured shareholders that despite the show's success, the company would be investing an additional \$200 million in production and development of fictional series for the 2011–12 schedule. [89] Furthermore, executives scheduled the most promising dramatic programs after *The Voice*'s two-hour timeslot on Mondays, which successfully launched two 10 PM dramas—*Revolution* (2012–2014) and *The Blacklist* (2013–present)—for the network. [90] By December 2012, NBC had moved from last to first place among the broadcast networks. *New York Times* writer Bill Carter profiled the show's impact on the network and asked,

"Could it still be true that even the worst performing television network is only one hit away from a turnaround?" [91]

With the lessons learned from the failure of *The Jay Leno Show*, NBC finally found a show that successfully adapted to the post-network marketplace through its clever use of traditional broadcast programming strategies and its reliance on live viewing—the "killer app" they had been seeking for years.



NBC placed its new J.J. Abrams' show *Revolution* after its huge ratings hit *The Voice* on Monday nights at 10 PM. *Revolution* debuted as the top new program for Fall 2012, and maintained strong ratings throughout its first season. It was moved to Wednesday nights for its second season, where it struggled in the ratings and was subsequently cancelled.



The Voice premiered on NBC in 2011, and became an immediate hit for the network. With its star power and flexible scheduling across several nights of the week, the program helped propel NBC to a first-place network finish for the first time in a decade.



NBC placed the James Spader-led *The Blacklist* after *The Voice* in the Fall of 2013. It quickly became the top rated new series, and maintained strong ratings throughout its first season. NBC kept its Monday 10 PM timeslot for its second season, but chose to put another new program there during *The Blacklist*'s hiatus, a testament to the power of *The Voice* as a lead-in.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes

1. All time slots discussed in this essay will use Eastern Standard Time.
[\[return to text\]](#)
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4. The Super Bowl is typically the most watched program of the year. The 2009 Super Bowl reached around 95 million viewers, thus exposing a large number of people to *The Jay Leno Show*. See: Collins, Scott. "Super Bowl Gets 95.4 Million Viewers; No. 3 Telecast of All Time." *Los Angeles Times* 2 Feb. 2009. Web. 11 Aug. 2014; Stelter, Brian. "NBC Builds Anticipation for 10 P.M." *New York Times* 5 August 2009. Web. 6 August 2009.
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8. Mittell, Jason. "The Aesthetics of Failure." *The Velvet Light Trap*. Number 64. Fall 2009. 77.
9. Leno had been ranked in the top ten favorite television personalities every year between 1994 and 2009 but one according to the annual Harris Poll. During many of those years, talk show hosts accounted for at least half of the top ten, which attests to the degree that a stripped program's regularity builds long-term relationships with viewers. See: "Here's Jay! Jay Leno Is America's Favorite Television Personality." *Harris Interactive* 28 January 2009. Web. 4 August 2014.
10. Headlines was a regular segment in which Leno made fun of erroneous headlines found in newspapers across the nation. The segment was so popular that several books were published that compiled the most popular Headlines over the years he was on *The Tonight Show*. Jaywalking was an occasional

segment which involved Leno wandering through the streets of Los Angeles and asking people current event or history questions, resulting in humorous and unexpected responses. Several of the more popular individuals featured on Jaywalking received their own segments on *The Tonight Show*. Battle of the Jaywalk All-Stars featured several of these individuals competing in a *Jeopardy*-style quiz competition.

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12. Ibid. 106 and 151.

13. Ibid. 155.

14. Carter, Bill. "The Late-Night-Lead Turnabout." *New York Times* 6 Nov. 1995. Web. 5 Aug. 2014.

15. O.J. Simpson, a former professional football player turned actor, was charged with killing his ex-wife, Nicole Brown, and her friend, Ronald Goldman, in June 1994. After failing to turn himself into police, he led a widely broadcast police chase on June 17, 1994, before surrendering. Beginning in January 1995, Simpson's eight-month long trial was controversial, and it was covered endlessly by news outlets. The length of the trial, as well as its highly public nature, made it a ripe target for comedic bits, including Leno's "The Dancing Itos" segment making fun of presiding judge Lance Ito. See: Lowry, Brian. "Changing Channels: Top Few Reasons Behind Dave's Dive, Jay's Rise." *Variety* 3 Jan. 1996. Web. 5 Aug. 2014.

16. Carter, Bill. "Fox Will Sign Up 12 New Stations; Takes 8 from CBS." *New York Times* 24 May 1994. Web. 5 Aug. 2014.

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26. Quoted in Adalian, Josef. "ABC Slots Sweeps with 'Millionaire.'" *Variety* 24 September 1999. *LexisNexis*. Web. 6 June 2010.
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30. Ibid.
31. Carter, Bill. "Fixing a Vulnerable 'Millionaire.'" *New York Times* 30 October 2000. *LexisNexis*. Web. 18 June 2010.
32. Kissell, Rick. "Peacock Pads Lead." *Variety* 24 May 2001. *LexisNexis*. Web. 6 June 2010.
33. Quoted in Collins, Scott. "ABC Vows More 'Traditional' Fare." *Hollywood Reporter* 21 March 2002. *LexisNexis*. Web. 6 June 2010.
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35. Quoted in Carter, Bill. "Who Wants to Bury a Millionaire?" *New York Times* 20 May 2002. *LexisNexis*. Web. 18 June 2010.
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41. Only *Community*, which aired as part of NBC's Thursday night comedy block, was not produced or co-produced by Universal Media Studios during the 2008-2009 prime time season. It was produced by Sony Pictures Television.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



The film's poster, with the dark male figure and the angelic woman at the bottom of an elevator, already foreshadow issues of space, power, and ethical choices.



Breaking down the iron curtain between Hungary and Austria in 1989 at the so-called "Pan-European Picnic."

Inhabiting post-communist spaces in Nimród Antal's *Kontroll*

by [György Kalmár](#)

"The weak must continually turn to their own ends forces alien to them."

—*Michel de Certeau*

Kontroll, the first feature film of the Hungarian-born filmmaker Nimród Antal, was shown in Hungarian cinemas in late 2003, only a couple of months before the country joined the European Union.[1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] This was the time of what was probably the most significant historical turning point of recent Hungarian history besides the 1989 regime change, which ended the Soviet occupation of the country together with state-party communist dictatorship. In 2003 the vast majority of Hungarians were looking forward to the EU accession, the political speeches were about the country's long-awaited return to Europe, about Hungary finally regaining its rightful and dignified historical position in civilized Europe (which at the time was unanimously and uncritically identified with the relatively new organization of the EU). Thus, the time when the film was shown marks a symbolic boundary that is somewhere halfway between the 1989 regime change and the present moment.

In 1989, as a secondary school student, I participated at the political demonstration in my hometown, Debrecen on March 15 (a national holiday celebrating the 1848 Hungarian uprising against Habsburg rule). Three generations of my family were there at that demonstration, shouting "Ruszkik haza!" (Russians go home!), together with thousands of others. It felt like times were changing. Some people whispered that Russian tanks were approaching the centre of the town, coming from the suburban barracks, as in 1956, but it proved to be a fake. As far as I know, this was the only political demonstration in the recent history of the country that all members of my family could wholeheartedly support. Hungarian political life does not often present occasions of unambiguous meaning and value: to this day this was the only political demonstration that I participated. The Russian forces left, the country officially regained its freedom, the iron curtain at the Western border was dismantled, and the Hungarians invaded Vienna's shopping streets so as to return home in their smelly, loud, now officially *post-communist* cars fully packed with refrigerators, music centers and video players, intoxicated by the apparent richness of consumerism. The long-awaited political, economic and social transformation of Hungary began.

The years since 1989 saw dramatic (and often unexpected) changes that



Citizens of the former Soviet Bloc are breaking out from behind the barbed wires. For many East-German families this was the first time to see their West-German relatives.



The press photos of the event clearly indicate the symbolic aspect of the event, as the people rush through the opened gate.



The queues at the newly opened Hungarian-Austrian border, on pilgrimage to the Austrian consumer paradise.

strongly influenced Hungarian identity-politics, cultural patterns, and my fellow citizens' view of the EU. In 2013, when I returned to Hungary after spending a month abroad, the first government-paid TV ad I saw showed Hungarians protesting against the EU, holding a huge banner saying "Nem leszünk gyarmat! / We will not be a colony!" Apparently, in 2013 "We will not be a colony" was a sentence with such popularity that it could be mobilized for purposes of political propaganda.[2]

Kontroll takes the viewer to these confused and confusing years, where some of the basic questions of Hungarian identity politics were asked again, as a result of the ambiguous experiences of the country's change to consumer capitalism. This confusion and remapping, which led to a fascinating artistic output in the early 2000's, seems to be an experience shared by Western visitors and critics as well. As Katherine F. Cornell argues in "Paradise Redrawn: Film and Transition in Eastern Europe":

"For those of us from the West who went to Eastern Europe after 1989, the process of transformation felt at first accessible and straightforward... Yet, after a few celebratory months, the clarity of a hard-won victory clouded up... Individuals are reluctant, even unable, to vocalize the tensions and contradictions that characterize their lives after communism."
(57)

Here I argue that *Kontroll* is inspired by precisely these tensions, contradictions, and the mixing of old and new ways, ideologies and practices—phenomena shared by both postcolonial and post-communist countries (see: Moore 115). The protagonist's night time wanderings in the Budapest metro (looking for a "way out") reflect a very common feeling of confusion in the Eastern-European subject after communism. In the following analysis I will follow the footsteps of Anikó Imre's groundbreaking study of Eastern-European cinemas and Steve Jobbit's reading of *Kontroll* in particular. It was Imre who highlighted the intricate connections between Eastern European cinemas, the historical context and the region's distinguishable identity-politics in her *Identity Games*, and it was Jobbit, who first attempted to read *Kontroll* in the context of the EU accession. My reading is also informed by Christine Grimes Topping's interpretation of the film, which places the protagonist's struggles in the context of power, powerlessness and postmodern societies.

Following these works and relying on Michel de Certeau's inspiring post-Foucauldian analysis of space and resistance tactics, I will place the film in a peculiar Eastern-European context, with a special focus on relations between (geo-political) space and identity politics, with an eye on the historical background of these politics. As an Eastern-European post-communist subject myself, I wish to analyse those aspects of the film and the cultural issues raised by it that perhaps may be explored in their complexity only by those who live or lived in the region. In my interpretation, *Kontroll* takes the spectator to a (culturally constructed) land struggling with issues of (post)-coloniality, exploitation and inferiority complexes. The film depicts a time when coming to terms with the past and the evaluation of possible futures are key aspects of the historical situation.

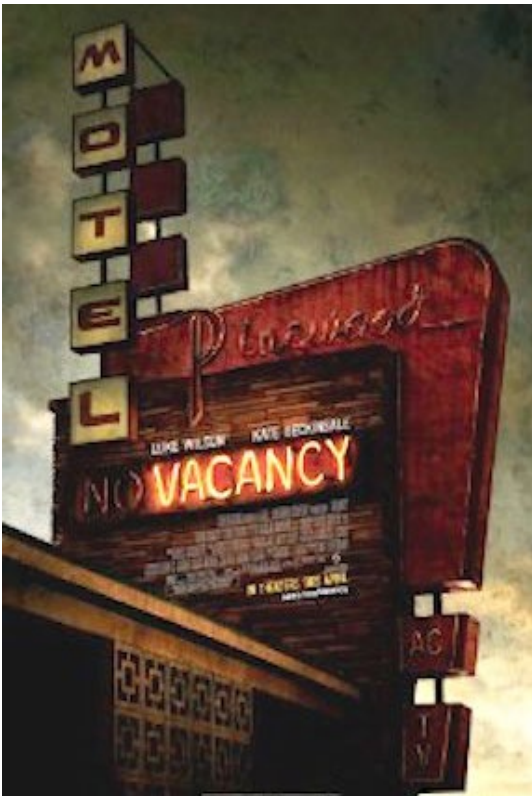
Interviews with Antal sound similar to the "disclaimer" of the head of the Budapest Metro system in the beginning of *Kontroll*. Antal always emphasise the "universal" theme (of good and evil) of the film. Moreover, several reviews written outside the region (see: Topping, for example) and



The Gorenje refrigerator on top of a socialist car has become one of the icons of the regime change.



"We will not be a colony!" Mass demonstration in Budapest against the EU in 2013.



a number of conversations I had at international conferences suggest that *Kontroll* can be read outside this Eastern-European context, even as a genre film perhaps. However, following a “hermeneutics of suspicion” characteristic of many people in the Eastern-European region, I would choose to read Antal’s self-interpretive remarks and the CEO’s disclaimers as signs or symptoms of the very cultural processes that they wish to hide.

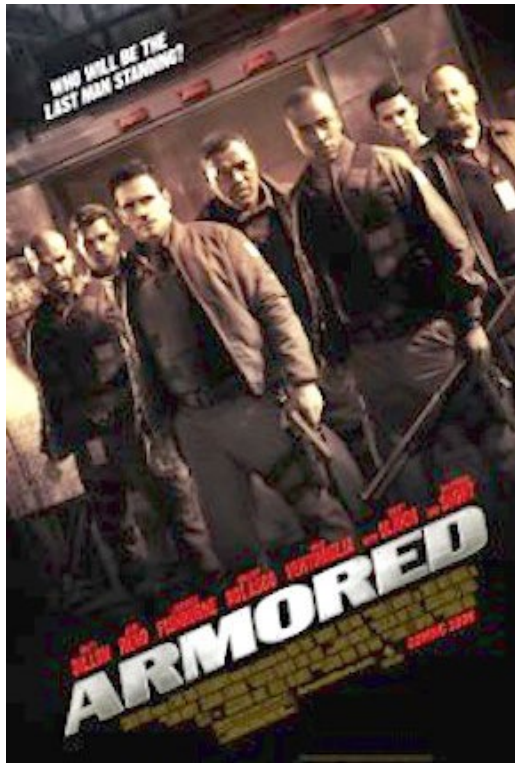
Instead of their official statements, I will rather start out from the experience of Eastern-European spectators, focusing on the specifics of space, time, culture and history, instead of “universal” topics. I would argue that such seemingly fundamental issues of human life as power or identity can never be treated as universals without the risk of seriously flattening them, as these aspect of life are articulated in historically, culturally and geographically diverse forms. Moreover, in my opinion, when taken as a genre film without this historical and cultural background, *Kontroll* is a relatively mediocre work. However, in light of the context of local identity politics, culture and history, it proves to be a real treasure trove.

Nimród Antal belongs to a generation that may have first-hand memories of communism, the regime change and the cultural shifts that it entailed. His life’s geographical coordinates, however, are exactly the opposite of the typical movements of his Hungarian generational peers. While the national intellectuals and artists born in the 1970s are basically the first generation of Hungarians who could freely travel and study in the West during their university years, Antal was born of Hungarian parents in Los Angeles (as much in the West as possible), and came to study and work in Hungary only after the regime change.

It was *Kontroll*, the film that he made in Eastern-Europe with a local crew and setting, that brought Antal international recognition. It seems as if the film gained its inspiration and originality from the intercultural encounter brought about by his visit to the country. This “intercultural experience” often appears in the film as a play of perspectives (looking at “the East” with “Western” eyes and vice versa), and as the creative Eastern-European appropriation of certain Hollywood genre conventions (most notably that of the thriller). I would argue that the relative mediocrity of Antal’s later films shot in Hollywood (as *Vacancy* 2007, *Armored* 2009, *Predators* 2010—none of which won such prestigious prizes as *Kontroll* did[3]) may also indicate that the most memorable momentums of Antal’s oeuvre (so far) stem from intercultural encounters, genre hybridity, and the Eastern-European rewriting of U.S. cinematic patterns. In particular, *Kontroll* offers a critical dialogue of different cultures, and from a special play of perspectives which offer ironic and often ambiguous glimpses of the peculiarities of the involved cultural formations. (image 8, 9, 10)

The film *Kontroll* is set entirely in the Budapest subway, in one of these slightly run-down, trashy, graffiti-tainted, sunless, recognizably Eastern-European technological spaces. Its main characters are ticket inspectors, which is probably the most detested job in Hungary (apart from politicians): “Everybody hates us,” says Bulcsú, the protagonist. The spaces and characters of *Kontroll* are closely tied to such a rich reservoir of local meaning that probably only the “locals” can fully comprehend them. As some “Western” reviews of *Kontroll*—such as that of Roger Ebert’s short review, or Christine Grimes Topping’s otherwise informative article—clearly show, the significance of the concept of control and the peculiar mechanisms in which it is inscribed in Easter-Europe easily escape or confuse the non-local interpreter (see: Topping 238).

Nimród Antal's Hollywood debut, *Vacancy* (2007).



Armored (2009), another Hollywood genre film by Antal.



Eastern-Europe, the former “second world,” appears in *Kontroll* as *another* kind of space with other mechanisms of power and other constructions of identity than the culturally more privileged, richer, Western, democratic “first” world. When Hungarians first travel to “the West” (a word that carries as much ideological and mythical significance in Hungarian) they are often surprised that the majority of Norwegians, British or Germans for example (they were my surprises 20 years ago) pay for public transport as a matter of course, they do not devote much of their creative potential to seek ingenious ways of tricking the system, and they do not regard the (rarely seen) ticket inspector as a natural born nemesis.

What does the spectator miss who never experienced living under an oppressive political regime? What does a viewer for whom social control was never a means of exploitation miss, someone for whom surveillance never meant a physical or existential threat, who was never afraid of policemen and official letters, who never had to survive *in spite of* social systems of control, who never travelled without paying and never feared the appearance of ticket controllers?[4]

As the work of Michel Foucault and Michel de Certeau clearly indicate, a community's life is always more complex and more heterogeneous in meaning than what discursive academic disciplines can express. It always has something more to it than what sociology, history, anthropology or any abstract science may reveal (see: Certeau 6-9). Of course academic studies do analyse several components of these cultural processes, in particular, those that may explain questions raised by regional narratives, films or identities. For example, scholars writing on Eastern-European film have considered the exceedingly traumatic history of the region, its economic and cultural marginalization, the weakness of social solidarity, or the compensatory conservatism of local constructions of masculinity (see: Imre or Hankiss).

However, life in a cultural space necessarily has some kind of a surplus or leftover that cannot be grasped with traditional academic modes of theoretical-conceptual discussion. These are often seemingly small or insignificant, material, practical, physical or behavioural phenomena that nevertheless express key elements of one's experience of living in that particular culture and space. I believe that of all known art forms, these tiny, materially defined elements can be best represented in film. Film—as all the major figures of realist film theories have argued—has that special connection to the material world that can easily turn it into a rich reservoir of hardly verbalizable or symbolizable gestures, postures, bodies and material elements.

According to Foucault, the history of a given community may be understood and analysed on basis of the way it relates to and organizes space (see: Szekeres 39). The politics of space in *Kontroll* (as I have argued elsewhere[5]) may be understood as one constituted by the relations of East and West, exploited local weirdos and faceless normal citizens, an emptied, abject postcolonial space and its global, technological invasion. However, there are certain aspects of the issues of space, power and subjectivity that cannot be reduced to these metaphors of geopolitical power and colonization. I would argue that the politics of space and subjectivity in *Kontroll* may also be understood as constructed by the relations of a culturally dominant, disciplining and controlling social-ideological-technological environment (or system) on one hand, and the subjects who seek tolerable ways of life and forms of identity in this space.

Predators (2010). Antal's genre films also show his ability to create condensed dramatic situations in closed spaces, yet they never grow out of the boxes created by genre conventions.

The main characters clearly regard the space and the system they inhabit as alien, hostile, something forced on them by powers beyond their reach—an attitude similar to that of marginalized groups analysed by Certeau who “lack their own space” and therefore have to survive in a space “instituted by others” by “foiling the other’s game” (18). This, of course, is a recurrent motif of social and political life in Eastern-Europe, where subordination, oppression, exploitation and deception are key elements of the subject’s relation to state (official, bureaucratic) power almost regardless of what parties are in government, or whether it is a communist dictatorship or a democracy.[6] The film, similarly to Hungarian social spaces, is strongly influenced by metaphors of power and control.

In this sense, the space of the metro in *Kontroll* is constructed through a dominant, globalized, technological rationality, a space constructed by the working of an apparatus of power and ideology that the subject inhabiting it recognizes as oppressive and all-powerful. As opposed to geopolitical regions with more victorious popular histories and longer democratic traditions, Eastern-European subjects seem sceptical about their ability to change the system with heroic deeds, so they apply guerrilla tactics. Of course, as Foucault demonstrated throughout his oeuvre, these struggles are not simply about “getting” or “having” power or “giving power back to the people.” What is at stake is rather the organization of social spaces and identities, that is, the order and meaning of things. In the film, the space of the Budapest metro seems organized by such a dominant social mechanism. It organizes social spaces, interactions, things and identities by relying on the technological regulation of space and also by applying certain well-definable ways of looking, ideological value systems and social practices.

Thus, the Budapest metro, much like Bentham’s Panopticon, functions in the film as an “architectural apparatus” that works like “a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it” (Foucault 201). It is much more than a mode of transportation. In line with the recent Eastern European cinematic tendency to use allegory in discourses of crisis (see: Virginás 133), in *Kontroll* the metro system grows into an allegory of Eastern-European social space; it refers to an oppressive system productive of social-symbolic order, visibility, meaning and identity. The film’s protagonists are antiheroes who desperately try to swim against the current or trick the system in order to turn this identity and social position given to them into something tolerable, dignified and even fun.

It is clear in the film that none of the ticket controllers came “down” to work in the metro voluntarily. These people were forced to go underground by some misfortune, accident, weakness or trauma. People who work (or live) here are not heroes, as they do not believe that things can be changed, that there is an ultimate victory waiting for them. The basic premise of their lives is the acceptance of their inferiority to the system, which however, does not imply the acceptance of total subjection. The “space” of the identity politics acted out in the film is set precisely in this gap between inferiority and subjection: it is about what the weak may do to trick the system. The originality of the film and the spectator’s joys, I would argue, stem partly from the film’s showing how these antiheroes can form “liveable” identities in hostile spaces, that is, from representing the tactics that might help the post-communist subject appropriate or inhabit this un-homey space.

The Hungarian language has a very useful expression for this activity of making a space habitable or homelike. The sentence *Péter a házban lakik* means *Péter lives in the house*, while the sentence *Péter belakja a házat* means that Péter does things that make the house he lives in feel like his own space or home. *Be* in Hungarian is a preposition meaning *into*, so *belakni* does not simply stand for habitation *in* a given space (house, room, apartment), but also what one does *to* it. It is in this second sense that I wish to use the English expressions *to inhabit* and *inhabitation*, implying that inhabiting is not something passive, but a rather complex process in which human beings build a personal relation with the space they inhabit: they grow emotional ties to the space, establish repeated practices that make certain parts of the space meaningful (for example, *This is where I drink my morning coffee. This is where we cuddle up in the evening.*). They even place the inhabited space within a larger cultural-ideological matrix—defining one’s home—consciously or unconsciously—as a land of peace, a place of resistance, a bachelor’s room, an opium den, a bunker, a place of taste and culture, a family nest, a luxurious place for others to envy, etc.. The key element in this complex process of the inhabitation or appropriation of space is that—as the Hungarian expression also shows (*lakni* means to live or dwell)—it is done while and through living in that space. One can decorate or furnish a house without living there, but this kind of *belakás* / *in-habitation* can take place only through one’s repeated daily activities in that space.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



The lonely human figure in huge geometrical spaces.



These images tell more about the relations of the human subject to technological societies than any narrative or dialogue.

Let us take a closer look at the constructions of social space in *Kontroll* and examine the local identity-games and tactics through which the protagonists relate to it. One of the most noteworthy experiences the film's spectator senses may be the coldness of spaces. The film is set in the Budapest metro, a technological space without anything green or organic, without sunshine or blue skies, sunrises and sunsets: it is all made of concrete, stone, metal and glass. The protagonist, Bulcsú sleeps on the stone floor of the platform each night. There is nothing around him that would make the place comfortable, soft, warm or cozy, and the only lights are the metro's emphatically cold (and often flickering) white neons. His life in these spaces is often represented by long shots showing the human being as a lonely and vulnerable figure in huge, empty, technological, geometrical, non-organic spaces.

The mise-en-scene lacks everything that could make a metro pleasant in everyday life. There are no musicians, funny posters, colourful advertisements, contemporary art exhibitions, bakeries with inviting scents, or cozy coffee houses. This space is cold and functional. Within this space of modern, rationalized, mechanical mass societies, people appear either as a sort of flowing faceless material (the "normal" paying passengers) or as impurity or aberration (the non-conforming beings who travel without paying and the ticket controllers). People of the first type are almost invisible in the film. Similarly to what we see in other allegorical dystopias such as *The Matrix* (Wachowski Bros. 1999), they appear as well-tamed, controlled, conformist, uniform beings accepting the common ideological dream.

It is against this background of faceless masses going to work every day that the black comedy of local half-wits is played out. As opposed to in *The Matrix*, these counter-cultural activists are neither stylishly dressed nor trained in heroic combat. They are the real locals, the leftovers of globalization, the compromised ones who hate and obstruct the same power that they serve. It is not by accident that they are the ones who carry out the *inhabitation* of spaces. They live in the metro (Bulcsú), smoke and drink alcohol there though both are prohibited (Béla, Lecsó, K, Tibi), eat in the subway train (Béla, Bulcsú), do their morning exercises on the platform (Muki), keep eating pumpkin seeds and spitting the shells (the controllers in general). They are dirty, badly dressed and wounded. They swear profusely, insulting and sometimes cursing each other. They fill up social spaces with their bodily smell (Lecsó), with their customs and superstitions (emphatically: Uncle Béla), with their psychological problems. They piss themselves (Professor, Gonzó), throw up (Tibi), spit at each other, and so on.

As Certeau himself also often mentions, in the 20th century one may discern a certain academic interest in these everyday practices. Several key intellectual figures—such as Freud in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* or Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations*—turned towards the everyday and the ordinary for inspiration or models of understanding, thus bridging what Certeau calls the "cleavage" between scientific thought and

practical resistances, a gap typical of modernity (see: 6). The fundamental recognition of this approach is that a community's life, behaviour, opinions, or its social reality are at least as strongly shaped by seemingly insignificant practical behaviours and habits as by social, cultural or economic macro-processes (the usual targets of scientific investigations).

The whole discipline of anthropology may be characterised by the aim of giving meaning and symbolic significance to everyday practices, and the work of such influential figures as Foucault or Bourdieu also point towards the integration of material practices in social theory. Michel de Certeau's above quoted *The Practice of Everyday Life* belongs to this intellectual trend. In that work, his goal is to analyse and understand the practices of marginalized people similar to *Kontroll*'s protagonists. He wants to trace the tactics of resistance with the help of which "order is tricked" and these marginalized subjects "make innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules" (xiii-xiv). Certeau follows Foucault's footsteps but with an opposite goal—to investigate modes of resistance:

"If it is true that the grid of 'discipline' is everywhere becoming clearer and more extensive, it is all the more urgent to discover how an entire society resists being reduced to it, what popular procedures (also 'miniscule' and quotidian) manipulate the mechanisms of discipline and conform to them only in order to evade them..." (xiv).

According to Certeau, the weak cannot hope to change the system, they do not have a space of their own (18) from which they could launch strategic attacks on the dominant social formation. Therefore they manoeuvre in alien spaces and institutions, making do with whatever the moment may offer in order to evade disciplinary power and to bring playfulness and ambiguity into totalizing social systems of technological rationalism (see: 35-37). These processes, which Certeau also associates with popular culture as such, and the

"ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong thus lend a political dimension to everyday practices" (xvii).

One of Certeau's favourite examples, the Catholicism of colonized Latin-American people, may serve as a useful analogy for the tactics seen in *Kontroll*. These religious beliefs and practices seem to take over, accept and follow the religion of the colonizing Spaniards although that religion obviously also worked as an operational tool of colonizing power. However,

"the Indians ... often *made* of the rituals, representations and laws imposed on them something quite different from what their conquerors had in mind; they subverted them not by rejecting or altering them, but by using them with respect to ends and references foreign to the system they had no choice but to accept" (xiii).

In my opinion, in Eastern-European societies one may find examples of such power relations and guerrilla tactics that exceed the Latin-American case in complexity by far. In fact, these attitudes and tactics of resistance are so fundamental to the cognitive maps and behavioural patterns of the region that they are often practiced unconsciously as a matter of course. Power is intimately connected with corruption and oppression, so it is only

natural that one simultaneously obeys it and tricks it whenever one safely can. The fact, for example, that the ticket controllers of the film are employed and paid by the same disciplinary power that they despise, trick and use to their own ends is a contradiction only for the non Eastern-European spectator.

Let us only recall the case of Géza Hofi, the most popular Hungarian stand-up comedian of the communist regime, who was loved and adored by audiences for his funny and daring critique of the system. As it turned out after 1989, when certain formerly secret state documents were made public, Géza Hofi was also a secretly recruited agent of the State Security Bureau, the most fearful agency of the dictatorship he criticised. What is important to see here—and what is crucial if one wishes to understand the identity politics of *Kontroll*—is that in Eastern-Europe these two seemingly contradictory things do not exclude each other. People here often had to learn living with compromises and compromised identities. In my opinion the case is not, as some people have suggested, that Géza Hofi was only *apparently* critical of the communist regime as *actually* he was an agent and servant of its power.



Giving the finger.

As I have argued apropos of György Pálfi's *Taxidermia*, the present social and ethical problems of post-communist countries—such as the high level of corruption, tax evasion, or low level of social solidarity—may stem from the way traditional, unambiguous historical roles such as hero, traitor, victim were mixed up in the region. This led to a relative scarcity of historical figures of unambiguous value required for “normal,” idealizing identity-formations (see: “What the Body Remembers” 200, Meusburger 58). In other words, in Eastern-Europe it is particularly difficult to be (only) a hero. The subject is always already constructed in a strange, potentially threatening and oppressive social space, in which “straight” identity politics may be dangerous, so one must apply evasive movements and make tactical compromises.



A symbolic gesture: Géza Hofi, the most celebrated Hungarian comedian of the communist times, contemplating the inside of a hospital chamber-pot, thus also using it as a mirror. A par excellence image of the subject of state communism.

These compromises and the pacts one makes with the system in order to protect oneself and one's family from real or imagined dangers, however, make idealizing impossible and constructions of identity contradictory. Eastern-European film characters seldom look into the vastness of space with heroic eyes and straight backbones, as Hollywood actors must do—in order to establish the subject's relation with fantasies of infinity and heroism required for idealizing identification and stardom. The characters in *Kontroll* never see the horizon, their body postures signify fatigue and quiet compromises, and in one of the last scenes Bulcsú breaks the mirror that shows him the dark secrets he carries. The camera work—when it blurs the lines between the spectator and the killer or between the spectator and the surveillance system—also creates such “compromised” spectatorial positions. As Topping remarks,

“the narrative positions revealed in the push sequences eventually place the viewer in a culpable position as well” (240).

Thus, the film not only lets the spectator see these characters' “compromised” identities: it also turns us into active and “culpable” participants in their identity-games.

One of the “catches” in this situation is that these cultural mechanisms and even one's knowledge of them do not acquit one from moral responsibility. The particularly dark and often grotesque tones of Eastern-European literature and film may very well have to do with these identity politics and



The ever-present gaze of power.



"What are you looking at?" Bulcsú is the only character who dares to look back (in anger).



The ticket inspectors' underground hall, with the eye-like neon above them.

the secret traumas and unacknowledged guilt associated with them. Why does the protagonist of Franz Kafka's protagonist in *The Trial* accept his guilt and ask for death? Why does Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov fail to be a Napoleonic superman beyond good and evil? Why is Bulcsú so melancholic, like so many other characters of Eastern-European film and literature? Why do they play so often with the idea of death (as Bulcsú does)? I would argue that one sees the logic behind these phenomena only if one knows the typical regional mechanism of power, ideology, resistance and identity.

The cinematic definition of the politics of space in *Kontroll* is not only shaped by the physical appearance of the characters and their material practices, but also by certain techniques of looking and visual control. The film seems consciously to associate the cold, disciplined, controlled, technical spaces of the subway with a kind of non-human, panoptic vision. This cold rationality and order of the system, and the above mentioned long shots that show the human form as an isolated, lonely stain in the geometric technical environment, are clearly connected to this totalizing and normalizing technology of the gaze and control, which Foucault's analysis in *Discipline and Punish* presents as a defining feature of Western societies (see: 195-228). The work the film's protagonists do is constantly monitored by security cameras (and the film camera often assumes their positions), creating motion picture recordings that only "the suits" (the subway's chief executives) may see. As it turns out in one of the last scenes of the film, these recordings are not only archived by the management but also manipulated and edited in order to make the subject (in this case Bulcsú) seem guilty.

In other words, the "higher" management that is in control of the "lower" ticket controllers or the agency behind the faceless security cameras is ethically no less corrupted than anyone in the film. The scars on the face of the boss (György Cserhalmi) seem to indicate this moral corruption, the obscenity of post-communist Law, while the grey suits and behaviour of the managers clearly evoke the figures of party bureaucrats of the communist era. The uniform suits of the management (as opposed to the very local, torn and dirty look of the protagonists) also place the conflict between "high" and "low" in the context of social conformity. The main characters act and live under the *super-vision* of this faceless, panoptic, disciplining gaze. They look like organic visual curiosities in a technological space. They often cast down or avert their eyes (for example when "the suits" appear on the platform after one of the "accidents"). Or sometimes they try to evade this all-seeing gaze (as the hooded serial-killer).

Bulcsú is a special case in this sense, as he is the only one who has the courage to look back, to return the gaze (be that the gaze of a camera or that of the boss). His night wanderings in the secret places of the subway system also make him a *flâneur*, thus establishing a very different approach to space, vision and power. His long walks in the metro, however, always take him to places where he meets metaphorical, superhuman eyes looking at him.



The "little boss" at his desk with the red telephone symbolizing "high" connections and power.



The ticket inspectors waiting for work look like industrial workers of communist times.



They look like people who have given up the fight for a better life.



Smoking, cheap clothes, tired faces.

It is this panoptic, all-seeing, controlling, normalizing gaze and the space constituted by its mechanisms of power that must be somehow tricked by the non-conformist local anti-heroes of the film. First of all, the disorderly physical appearance of the controllers may catch our attention: they are shabby, badly dressed, wounded and smelly. In their introduction of Bulcsú's team in the metro's underground buffet we see Muki in shiny sports clothing (generally associated in Hungary with ghetto loungers, small-time crooks and uneducated entrepreneurs) putting a huge amount of ketchup on his French fries that he has for breakfast. The professor, smoking next to him in clothes left over from the past regime, keeps disparaging him for eating "such shit." They look up, surprised by a sudden attack of a bad smell, but they realize that it is only their teammate Lecsó arriving.

The morning briefing in the next scene is equally telling. It takes place in a ramshackle underground community room, lit by cold neon lights, furnished with tables, chairs, lockers clearly left from communist times. The controllers look like industrial workers of the previous era, or poor and unemployed people waiting for the social benefit allotment. They are badly dressed, bored and depressed, playing cards or chess, eating pumpkin seeds, talking softly.

The room is packed with unattractive, worn objects of communist times, the reminders of the tasteless pragmatism of communist ideology, and some funny, unfitting, non-functional objects. The "little boss" arrives, and he tries to brief the demoralized mass of workers and get them to work for the panoptical system that they probably all despise. Clearly, nobody loves this job, they all feel miserable, yet, they exhibit no sign of solidarity or any heroic conspiracy against the system.

The symbols of the controlling power to which they are subject are also present. When the "little boss" starts speaking, he steps on a little stool that makes him look taller and rise above the rest. He keeps pointing at the map of the metro system with his pointer; the map and its red dots standing for the stations clearly signify the geometrical, normalizing, panoptical ordering of space, and the pointer is a phallic, sadistic tool of power. On his desk we can see several old type of telephones, a well-established visual trope of bureaucratic power; and finally, the neon hanging over their heads is round-shaped, reminding the spectator of the gaze of the controlling, all-seeing Other.

These examples may indicate the way *Kontroll* employs two distinguishable modes of visibility so as to further define the opposition between the System's controlling power and the local subjects wishing to survive in its controlled spaces. As I have indicated above, the camera constructs the subway's technological spaces as geometrical, transparent, controllable and empty. These are the spaces of panoptic visibility: structured, functional and non-organic, the parts of a superhuman system of control. In contrast, the non-conforming characters, including the ticket controllers and the non-paying passengers, are usually presented in a markedly different visual style: these images are as uncontrollable, organic, tangled and sensuous as the people they show. The pictures of the briefing scene evoke the smell of stale clothes, unwashed bodies and cheap cigarettes: the look and feel of the clothes reveal that none of these are new, freshly washed or ironed. The inspectors' clothing gives the impression of



Haptic imagery of non-Hollywood faces.



The games on the tables (as well as the furniture) recall the times before the fall of communist dictatorship.

worn-out items or pieces collected from second-hand shops. (Second-hand clothes shops with pieces collected and imported from Western countries appeared in Hungary in the late 80s, and they are still important for those not too well paid or with a nonconformist taste.)

The materiality of these bodies and clothes is almost tangible—one can almost smell it. For the post-communist spectator these images evoke multi-sensorial memories: factory workers on the morning bus, dressing rooms of public sports facilities, local pubs with smoke, old furniture and tired bodies, smells of spicy sausage, pálinka, onion and garlic. The pictures detailing the human inhabitation of post-communist spaces seem to follow the visual logic of what Laura U. Marks calls *haptic visuality*. The term “haptic” comes from the Greek verb “to touch” and Marks applies it to such modes of cinematic representation where the object shown is close to the spectator and possesses some kind of a sensual materiality and saturation. In *The Skin of the Film* Marks contrasts *optical visuality*—dominant in Western painting and visual culture, based on the separation of the subject and object of the gaze, that aims at control over the visual space and the transparency of the relations of objects within that space—with *haptic visuality*:

“The ideal relationship between viewer and image in optical visuality tends to be one of mastery, in which the viewer isolates and comprehends the objects of vision. The ideal relationship between viewer and image in haptic visuality is one of mutuality, in which the viewer is more likely to lose herself in the image, to lose her sense of proportion.”(184)

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In other words, I argue that *Kontroll* employs specific means of film language (mainly mise-en-scene, composition and camerawork) in order to contrast the subway's controlled, panoptic spaces with the haptic human bodies that perform its *inhabitation*. The images showing the "inhabiting" locals are not based on the visual logic of control over the image and visual space, but rather on a rich, multi-sensorial overload. Film's usual control over space and meaning is overthrown by the spectator's bodily-stored, sensorial memories evoked by the thickly saturated sensuous images. Marks regards these processes as typical features of *intercultural* cinema, which (similarly to the "inhabiting" characters of *Kontroll*) must articulate its meanings and identity-games in a dominant, foreign cultural space. Marks calls attention to the roles of the body, memory and sensuousness in these cinematic processes:

"By appealing to one sense in order to represent the experience of another, cinema appeals to the integration and commutation of sensory experience within the body. Each audiovisual image meets a rush of other sensory associations. Audiovisual images call up conscious, unconscious, and nonsymbolic associations with touch, taste, and smell, which themselves are not experienced as separate. Each image is synthesized by a body that does not necessarily divide perceptions into different sense modalities." (222)

In other words, the typically post-communist clothes, food, objects, bodies and habitual practices seen in *Kontroll* do not work simply as local color, as entertaining, comic elements (though recognizing oneself in something comical and laughing at oneself are important parts of local identity-politics). These visual details also function as more than comments *on* or representations *of* post-communist subjects desperately trying to live a life they can call their own in spaces controlled by a power that they do not recognize as their own. The sight of these opens up a completely new dimension of the Eastern-European spectator's relation to the film. It is the dimension of involuntary physical responses, non-symbolic significances, bodily stored sensuous memories, one's deep, physical connections to a region and its smells, tastes and practices. These associations and memories add an extra layer to the (more or less) international narrative patterns and genre conventions utilized by the film. Through the sight of these haptic images and the physical-sensuous reactions evoked by them the spectator may also "inhabit" these cinematic spaces, that is, fill it up with one's own personal and (probably mostly) unconscious sensuous memories.



Uncle Béla smoking and drinking before his morning shift begins. (Béla is one of the names often used for a not too educated everyman in Hungarian.)

After all, most post-communist Eastern-European subjects have travelled on the packed morning bus or subway together with people smelling of stale clothes, unwashed bodies, the spicy sausage or garlic toast they had for breakfast. We all have sensorial memories of the furniture of the socialist era, of the old telephones on the desk. We know the characteristic smell of second-hand clothes shops, the touch of an old deck of cards or these games the characters play. We know how these cheap neon lights



Béla's private world in the train.



Béla as an angel.



Bulcsú finds Béla at night in his "home" in a subway car.

could hurt the eye on an early morning. We have walked by benches surrounded by shells of pumpkin or sunflower seeds that people have spit and left there. This non-symbolic, non-discursive significance of the film image adds to *Kontroll* as a genre film and twists its meaning in a manner similar to the way the "inhabiting" tactics of the non-conformist characters twist and bend the power-relations operating the metro (and the social) system.

Apart from the above-mentioned examples, the scenes involving the metro driver Uncle Béla exemplify best the processes and practices of "inhabiting." He is Bulcsú's friend, a kind of mentor figure and the father of Szofi, Bulcsú's love interest. As we learn, Béla also spends most of his time in the metro system, and he has also "inhabited" it in the full sense of the concept.

As Szofi tells Bulcsú, Béla used to be an engine driver "above" until once, presumably under the influence of alcohol, he misjudged the breaking distance in the Budapest Keleti train station. No one was hurt, but he caused much damage and was banished to here, underground. The first time we see him, he is standing on the platform, leaning against a pillar, smoking and drinking from a big, leather-bound flask (presumably home-made pálinka, the Hungarian national brandy, with usually 40-50% alcohol). During the scene there is an announcement that smoking is strictly prohibited in the metro. Béla has another drink from the flask, and steps into the subway's driver cabin. This cabin offers a perfect example of inhabitation tactics. Béla—obviously violating each and every traffic regulation—has made this space his own, furnished his cabin according to his own taste. It is densely packed with candles, pictures of saints and other religious objects, and there is even a bead curtain hanging at the door, evoking the atmosphere of weekend houses, rural kitchens and Eastern seraglios. When Szofi, his daughter, visits him, she sits next to him in the driver cabin, another traffic violation. They eat the sandwiches, presumably brought by Szofi, while talking about issues of life.

During his night time wandering Bulcsú also meets Béla, who is just having dinner in one of the parked underground cars. Surprisingly, this time the metro car appears as a cozy, habitable space. Apparently, Béla has furnished this car with the typical nostalgic objects of socialist retro. There is a checked blanket on the seat and a small camping table standing in front of it, laid for dinner: a portable gas cooker, tin mug, and all the elements of a typical rural supper, bread, bacon, onion and apple. In the window behind Béla there is an old radio from the 70s and a framed picture. On the right side, behind him, we can see the official map of the metro system, with the small picture of a woman, probably a model, placed in the corner—exemplifying how people colour the official order with their individual tastes and fantasies. (The picture of the woman may remind the spectator of car repair garages in the region, where—in the Socialist era when political correctness was an unknown term—the walls were usually decorated with pictures of half-naked women, mostly simply torn out from magazines and placed on the walls.)

All in all, Béla not only brings his religious beliefs into the official, technological, controlled spaces of the metro but the practical, personal objects of his life, his food preferences and his tobacco and alcohol addiction as well. The film (just like Bulcsú) seems to regard and record these oddities with love and enjoyment. Uncle Béla's world may remind the



Kusturica's Balkan gypsy paradise – another self-made, bricolage place at the margins of civilization.



Kusturica (as well as Béla's example) seems to suggest that happiness is possible in these self-made worlds, separated from power, the centre or politics.

spectator of Kusturica's Balkan paradises, such as the one in the opening scene of *Black Cat White Cat*, in which the film's protagonists are enjoying themselves on the margins of civilization, at the river bank on their makeshift pier made of recycled garbage.

The tactics of "inhabitation" presented by *Kontroll* may be less extreme and extravagant than those in Kusturica's films, but they also present marginalized people living on the edges of mass societies, applying creative, idiosyncratic, not-exactly-legal tactics so as to get by. Béla, similarly to the gypsies in *Black Cat White Cat*, is a likable *bricoleur* trying to establish his peculiar, habitable space on the periphery of civilization, bending the rules that can be bent, and obeying the ones that cannot. He is not a hero, he does not fight the system, does not want to change things. He does not dream about a grandiose, Hollywood-style happy ending where all turns well. He only colours, furnishes, makes things look like, smell like, feel like his own. He inhabits the space given. *Kontroll* seem to grant some kind of an ontological reality to these subjective, idiosyncratic worlds. The ontological status of the hooded figure remains undecided, we do not learn for sure whether he is a real person or just a fantasy figure. When the Professor is cursed by a gypsy woman (another non-paying customer), we hear a tinkling sound presumably indicating magic; and Béla also tends to appear as an angel. (It is Szofi who calls our attention to the way the light in the driver cabin produces a halo over Béla's head while he is eating his sandwich).

These local characters in their local colours inhabit the metro's globalized, technological spaces of surveillance in a way much similar to how *Kontroll* inhabits the international genre of the thriller. As a result, the film also becomes more interesting, colourful, ambiguous, multi-layered than the "standard" mainstream genre film. This enriches the context of Bulcsú's inner quest, underground wanderings and personal development. It is no coincidence that it is Uncle Béla that Bulcsú asks guidance from in the above mentioned supper scene. He is lost down here, but Béla seems to be alright, seems to know his way around, he seems to have made this cold and empty space habitable. Therefore the question "Uncle Béla, how can one get out of here?" is clearly allegorical. The two eat bread and onion together on the checked blanket in the subway car, telling bad jokes, and maybe this seemingly simple, innocent practical ritual turns into an act of angelic guidance.

According to de Certeau, the lack of a space of one's own (which is a common feature of both Béla's tactics of inhabitation and Bulcsú's underground wanderings) is a typical motivation for and fundamental aspect of the survival tactics of powerless, vulnerable people:

"By contrast with a strategy ... a *tactic* is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus. No delimitation of an exteriority, then, provides it with the condition necessary for autonomy. The space of a tactic is the space of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power. It does not have the means to *keep to itself*, at a distance, in a position of withdrawal, foresight, and self-collection: it is a manoeuvre 'within the enemy's field of vision,' as von Bielow put it, and within enemy territory. It does

not, therefore, have the options of planning general strategy and viewing the adversary as a whole within a district, visible, and objectifiable space. It operates in isolated actions, blow by blow. It takes advantage of 'opportunities' and depends on them, being without any base where it could stockpile its winnings, build up its own position, and plan raids. What it wins it cannot keep. This nowhere gives a tactic mobility, to be sure, but a mobility that must accept the chance offerings of the moment, and seize on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves at any given moment. It must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them. It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse." (36-37)

De Certeau's concept of tactics may serve as an important point of reference for the understanding of the film's protagonists' patterns of behaviour. The most self-reflexive and funny scenes of *Kontroll* present precisely these tactics. We see the highly creative ways non-paying passengers try to avoid being caught. For example, they pretend to suffer from hearing impairment, claim to have no ID with them, they put a curse on the controller, offer a prostitute instead of the fee, they run away, etc.. We also see the counter-tactics of the ticket controllers, helplessly struggling with them in their effort to serve a system they do not believe in either.

Let me mention one example in detail, one that I find particularly interesting from the point of view of tactical improvisations. In one of these micro-scenes Tibi, who must be in his twenties, asks for the ticket of a not very tastefully dressed, overweight, middle-aged woman. First the woman simply tries to pass by him, so as to get out of the space controlled by the metro authorities. When Tibi steps in her way, she threatens to report that he sexually harassed her ("megcsöcsörészte"). It is never mentioned who she wants to report him to, what authorities she has in mind, but it does not seem to matter—in her defence against the ticket controller, she evokes the fantasy of the faceless, controlling Other. Tibi seems to be surprised by such a creative response, but his embarrassment lasts for a second only: after a moment of hesitation he *does* touch her breasts. The woman hits him with her handbag and indignantly goes away.

Obviously, this scene—which should be about control and obeying social norms and rules—takes place entirely outside the domain of political correctness, in a field not controlled by the power of surveillance. Both Tibi and the woman play creatively with the available social roles, and apply tactics with the help of which they can bend the rules and turn things to their own advantage. The woman's threat flips the roles of controller/controlled subjects, and Tibi also twists the situation when he willingly and joyfully accepts the role offered to him. In both cases the Law is evoked only as a reference point that can be subverted, bent, and corrupted in games that these not-so privileged people seem to enjoy.

Lacking a proper place has a special significance in Bulcsú's case. While the panopticon is based on ordering and locating individuals ("each individual, in his place," Foucault 200), as this is the essential condition of surveillance and discipline, Bulcsú is homeless, he does not fit the system, cannot be located or placed or categorized within the matrix of power. While, according to Foucault, panoptical disciplining power is based on the systematic ordering and surveillance of individuals (200-201), the film

defines Bulcsú as someone out of place. He has left his proper job “above,” and he lives in the metro, and often spends his time wandering in the secret passages of the subway system. De Certeau, in his chapter about city walks, contrasts the systematic, planned, strategic, rational ordering of space practiced by panoptical power with such non-teleological movements in that space as walking or wandering around. These movements have their own logic or “rhetoric” and therefore they can confer new significance to official spaces.

Thus, the human subjects practicing such activities also make these spaces their own (see: 97-100). “To walk is to lack a place”—says De Certeau (103), and by “place” he means the proper place defined and allocated to one by power. Thus, Bulcsú’s walks are particularly interesting from this point of view. He goes to places that are forbidden to him both as a ticket controller and as a passenger, to places behind the scenes of power and subjectivity. What he finds in these hidden places often seems to articulate his relation to the power of surveillance and discipline through visual metaphors.

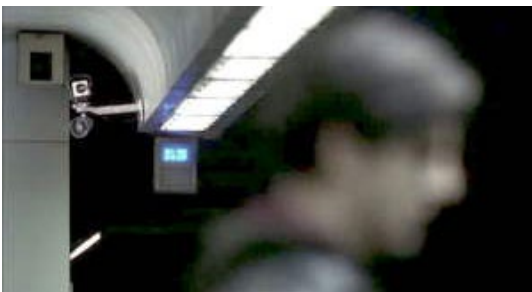
Wherever he goes, even if he manages to step out of the realm of security cameras, he encounters eye-like forms staring at him. The eyes seem to suggest that there is no escape. He has to face both the system of disciplinary power (this happens when he confronts the head of “the suits”) and his own frightful *doppelgänger* (this happens in his fight and “railing” contest with the hooded figure). The most characteristic and telling images of this allegorical quest story in the dark underground tunnels are those where Bulcsú is present only as a stain or a shadow, often photographed off-focus and ill-lit, an obscure organic object in a system of surveillance and power. What is in focus in these images is the technical environment. Its contours are sharp and clear (evoking the principles of optical visibility) while Bulcsú is hardly visible, a haptic stain, a piece of organic matter out of place, an outcast on the verge of the human, slipping out of the grip of the system of discipline, proper names and sharp contours.

Thus, these shots of Bulcsú can also be interpreted as visual definitions of the subject in post-communist spaces. As Jobbit has also argued, his quest for a way out can be seen as an allegorical representation of the Hungarian dilemmas before joining the EU. Yet the film never becomes a “plain,” easily decidable allegory. The non-conformist characters present a wide range of Eastern-European ways of relating to power so that their resistance tactics are not placed next to Bulcsú’s quest by accident. It is in this context of local modes of inhabitation and subversive tactics that the main character’s story gains its full significance. However, *Kontroll* also makes it clear that while Bulcsú is in the spaces of the metro (understood as an Eastern-European underworld), it is impossible to reach such standard goals of “Western” liberal-humanist societies as individual autonomy, sovereignty or human dignity. One may learn which rules must be obeyed and which may be bent or evaded by smart tactics of resistance and one may show the finger to “the suits,” but that does not by any means equal becoming free from the system.

Power in these spaces has a sort of pronounced obscurity, all-pervasiveness and obscenity; it works in unforeseeable and penetrating ways. Bulcsú’s relation to the hooded figure clearly shows the complexity of the deforming effects of Eastern-European practices of power. As the film also indicates in its self-reflexive ending, in order to achieve a traditional narrative closure and a happy ending in this region, one needs Sophie’s fairy-wings—a minor miracle, one could say. These are the wings (which quickly gain allegorical importance after the metro costume party) that lift Bulcsú out of the spaces



Inhuman eyes facing the protagonist.



The human figure is just a blurred stain in a closely watched technological space.

of the underground, from the abyss that the camera descended to in the first scene. The Eastern-European male subject, this beaten-up, lost and rejected lonely anti-hero, can only be saved by such an ironic, Hollywood-style gesture. Yet, the camera does not travel with Sophie and Bulcsú. *Kontroll* is a film about the Eastern-European underworld, and it cannot show what is above the ground.

If Hollywood is the only alternative, if this is the way out, than this is certainly an exit to a utopian place, to a (literally) non-existent one. The other place is a no-place; in other words, there is no other space. Salvation for the post-communist subject is no more than a Hollywood fairy-tale that one accepts with an ironic wink, with a very conscious, willing suspense of disbelief for the lack of anything better.

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Notes

1. This paper was supported by the János Bolyai Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. [[return to text](#)]
2. According to the 1995 study by the Institut für die Wissenschaften von Menschen (IWM) and the 1997 study by Meridán, the Hungarian population felt most disappointed by the democratic **cgange [diction. Correct word?]** from all post-communist Eastern-European countries.
3. Among other awards, in 2004 the film won the Prix de la Jeunesse in Cannes, the Gold Hugo at the Chicago International Film Festival for the best film.
4. In the summer of 2013 I had the chance to show the film to a group of Polish and Hungarian secondary school students, and later discuss it with them. My experience was that both Polish and Hungarian teenagers recognized the film and its typical situations as their own: they saw *Kontroll* as an Eastern-European film about local issues. Moreover, the questions regarding the human subject and one's relation to power often evoked multigenerational collective memories, which gave a unique, sombre overtone to the otherwise comic situations.
5. "Amikor a mélység visszanéz rád: a posztkommunista tér jellemzoi Antal Nimród *Kontroll* címu filmjében." KULTer, 2013/11.
6. Reading the Hungarian press in 2014 seems to prove Paul de Man's dictum in *Allegories of Reading* "Metaphors are much more tenacious than facts" (5). 25 years after the democratic change the Hungarian opposition claims that the government oppresses and exploits the people in a degrading and shameful way, while the government in turn claims that it is the alliance of the EU and multinational corporations that does this to the Hungarian people. Degrading oppression seems to be a constant key metaphor in Hungarian political thinking as well as in the film *Kontroll*.

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A “failed brotherhood”: Polish-Jewish relations and the films of Andrzej Wajda

by [Tim Kennedy](#)



Detail of Polish and French title page of a 1927 edition of the *Statute of Kalisz* illustrated by Arthur Syzk. Ink and paint on paper. The Jewish Museum, New York. (Gift of Andrew A. Lynn, JM 63-67. Jewish Museum/Art Resource, NY. Reproduced with the cooperation of Alexandra Syzk Braice and The Arthur Syzk Society, www.szyk.org).

For over 700 years Jews were a vibrant presence in Central and Eastern Europe. The earliest official recognition of their status in Poland was the Statute of Kalisz, which detailed the rights and privileges granted them by Boleslaw the Pious, Grand Duke of Poland in 1264. Despite their mixed fortunes—sometimes welcomed, other times reviled— by some estimates about three-quarters of the world’s Jews lived in the lands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth by the middle of the 16th century. This figure remained very nearly steady until the first part of the 20th century by which time they made up over ten percent (3.5 million) of the population of the emerging state of Poland.[1][\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth itself was under constant threat from its neighbors and from infighting between the ruling families. By the end of the 18th century it had disappeared, partitioned between the new Empires of Russia, Prussia, and Austria.[2] Attempts by the occupying forces to suppress Polish culture and language were resisted by a nation united by Catholicism, a common heritage and culture, and the spoken language.

Jews fared differently in the different partitions. But as Davies describes, as each of the occupying states imposed their authority, “Jews for the first time became full citizens of the countries in which they lived” (2005:177). However citizenship did not confer equality nor did it resolve issues of identity. To escape discrimination usually meant assimilation, which mostly involved Jews giving up much of their identity and “accepting the dominant religion, language and culture of the country in which they lived” (181).[3]



The dissolution of Poland by the partitions of 1772, 1793, and 1795.

A brotherhood of nations

Thus it has always been common to refer to Polish Catholics as Poles and to Polish Jews as Jews—that is as separate nations living in one place. However, the idea of Poles and Jews as “brothers” with a common cause first appeared at the end of the 18th century during the final, failed defence of the Commonwealth against Russian invasion, and it was cemented by various joint uprisings over the next 50 years, especially the 1863 Polish insurrection. From this latter event derived the important image of “Polish-Jewish comradeship-in-arms” (Steinlauf 1995:430). For some intellectuals they became a brotherhood of “the world’s two most suffering nations” (Opalski and Bartal 1992:2-5) with many common bonds, even in their religious faith.[4] However, the short-lived euphoria that gave rise to this rhetoric soon dissipated, perhaps inevitably, under the twin stresses of growing Polish and Jewish nationalism and the schisms caused by the rapid expansion in the latter half of the 19th century of raw, unfettered capitalism.

Though this ideal of a “brotherhood of nations” may have been partially mythical and in any case limited to small segments of the population, its failure has had far-reaching consequences. Hopes had been raised of a dynamic multi-cultural society only to be dashed, leaving a bitter resentment that has soured the relationship into current times. At least some of the resurgence of anti-Semitism in Poland in the late 20th century, which exacerbated the mutual recriminations that followed the Holocaust, can be traced back to the conflicts of the previous century.

The turbulent Polish-Jewish relationship over the hundred or so years



Zydowski by Zofia Stryjenska. Woodcut, ca. 1924. Postcard based on an original woodcut. Maja Trochimczyk Collection. Used by permission.

between the mid 19th and 20th centuries has been reflected extensively in art, music, literature, and poetry, each of which has received much critical attention.[5] For example, this decorative illustration of a “Jewish dance,” one of a set of eleven Polish country and formal dances, is far from innocent. Orthodox Jews would not dance in this manner and, as Bret Werb notes, it may refer to the way 19th century Polish landowners coerced “their Jews” to perform “a travesty of devout song accompanied by dancing and extravagant hand gestures” in order to ridicule them (2003:1).

Cinema has been more reticent on the subject, especially Polish cinema, with filmmaker Andrzej Wajda providing its most sustained examination. Throughout his career, he has made the treatment of Polish-Jewish relations “one of his major tasks” and has sought “to insist on the centrality of [this] issue for the Nation” (Stevenson 2003:76-77). However, that has often placed him at the centre of controversy as critics and film scholars have scrutinised this element of his work for the manner in which he has represented Jews and Polish-Jewish relations.[6]

Andrzej Wajda

Andrzej Wajda has lived through perhaps the most tragic period of Polish history. Born in 1926, just five years after the foundation of the modern democratic state and two months before its first military coup, he witnessed yet another dismemberment of his country, this time by the brutal forces of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, and the subjugation of its people to foreign control.[7]

His father, a captain in the Polish Infantry, was captured and killed by the Soviets in the secret massacre of Polish intelligentsia at Katyn in 1940.[8] Wajda, by his own account, had to remain in hiding during much of the war for fear of arrest and deportation by the Germans.[9] After the war he enrolled first in the Fine Arts Academy in Krakow and then graduated from the Lodz Film School in 1953. In his subsequent career as a filmmaker, he worked under various forms of Soviet-controlled political system and military dictatorship, until Poland emerged again as a democratic state in the 1990s.

Wajda’s first three films—*A Generation* (1954), *Kanal* (1957), and *Ashes and Diamonds* (1958)—form a trilogy set during WWII.[10] The last of these was especially successful both in Poland and internationally. As Stevenson describes that period, Wajda became “a key figure in the contemporary representation of an idea of Poland” (Stevenson 2003:82). Indeed, the exploration of Polish national identity through cinema became his lifetime’s work. Though not always successful, many of his films were influential with Poles, both in Poland and the diaspora in the campaign for national self-determination.[11]

Any analysis of films made under the communist regime in Poland has to take account of the rigid controls and censorship of cultural works.[12]



Ashes and Diamonds. In this much quoted scene, Maciek (Zbigniew Cybulski), a member of the Polish resistance movement, mocks the fate of a generation lost to war – a fatalism symbolised by burning vodka glasses lit in their memory.



Man of Marble. Wajda indirectly criticises the Stalinist regime in Poland with this film about an idealised Socialist worker-hero, Mateusz Birkut (Jerzy Radziwilowicz), first memorialised in marble and then consigned to obscurity by the authorities after being accused of leading a subversive Polish workers' movement.

Under this system all film projects had to be reviewed and approved by a committee of the politburo, and many of the scripts that Wajda wrote or commissioned had to be altered. At other times production was delayed or cancelled and he was often forced to cut or edit his films to suit the censors' demands: cinema was allowed "no political or moral ambiguity" and was required to "illuminate Communist achievements, denounce enemies of the state, and educate viewers in the spirit of socialism" (Mazierska 2005). However, the early international reputation he gained allowed Wajda, at least to a limited extent, to probe the boundaries of political freedom. He stubbornly continued to comment on the frequent subjugation and repression of the Polish people by hegemonic empires and totalitarian states, mainly through the optic of historical events.[15]

Ashes (1965), for example, deals with the Napoleonic campaigns of 1797-1813 and the quixotic and ultimately senseless attempt by the Polish nobility to free the nation from a previous period of Russian domination. *The Wedding* (1973), based on a verse play by Stanislaw Wyspianski and set around 1900, seems to suggest a socially divided nation again trying but failing to liberate Poland from foreign occupation.[14] His "war films" are largely concerned with attempts at resistance to Nazi rule, and his pair of films, *Man of Marble* (1977) and *Man of Iron* (1981), attack the Soviet-imposed authoritarian regime of the post-war period.[15] In different ways, these films were an indirect critique of the political situation in Poland. Then, in the uncertain political situation following the demise of the Soviet Union, Wajda made *Pan Tadeusz* (1998), returning to the early nineteenth century and rebellion against Russian domination. For many Poles, this film was "a celebration of Polishness" that re-created "the Poland of their dreams ... in which all their conflicts could be resolved" (Falkowska 2007:252).



Thus Wajda campaigned, within the bounds of state censorship, to help Poland resist being "digested" by the Soviet Union and to sustain Polish national identity.[16] Importantly, this did not exclude the other major narrative of Poland—that of the Jewish community. But Wajda's depiction of the historical treatment of Jews in Poland, the war, and the Holocaust, has not always yielded the results he might have wished for. As we shall see, though his "often proclaimed ambition has been to reconcile Poles and Jews" (Haltorf 2011:187), his work raises a number of important issues of representation: distortions of facts; conscious or unconscious stereotyping; the "Christianization of Jews"; the differentiated role of women; and his partial treatment of the experience of occupation on Poles and Jews.



Content and historical context




This article sets eight of Wajda's films in the context of debates over the Holocaust and the longer-term persecution of Jews in Poland. I argue that in these films he deliberately confronts audiences, especially Poles, with a series of questions that many have preferred to suppress or avoid. It is impossible to gauge with any accuracy the effect of Wajda's work on Polish attitudes at home or in the diaspora towards Jews. As we shall see, the controversies surrounding the release of two of his films — *Promised*

Land (1974), and *Korczak* (1990), and the eruption over Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985)[17] — provoked and stimulated debate among audiences, critics, and scholars that has been instrumental in the gradual opening up of a productive dialogue between Poles and Jews.[18] If for no other reason, Wajda's approach to the issue deserves detailed attention.

These films were made under varying regimes of censorship and control in Poland, and cover nearly a hundred years of Polish history. Thus we may think of two “parallel histories”: one of the content of the films and one of the general conditions of their production. The histories of the films under consideration are summarised in the table below.

Film title	Film content	General social and historical context
<p><i>A Generation</i> (1954)</p>  <p><i>A Generation</i>. Jasio (Tadeusz Janczar), a member of the Polish resistance, jumps to his death after being trapped by German soldiers – the enclosing, circular stairwell renders the inescapable fate of Poland surrounded by enemies.</p>	<p>1942-3 Polish resistance movement (communist).</p> <p>Warsaw Ghetto uprising and help for the Jews.</p>	<p>1946 Kielce massacre of returning Jews spurs wave of emigration (see note 28).</p> <p>State censorship of cinema. Socialist Realism “encouraged” in the arts.</p> <p>Criticism of non-communist resistance (Home Army), Catholicism, and Capitalism.</p> <p>1953-56 Cultural thaw at end of Stalinist regime. Despite the continued heavy political censorship a “Polish School” of filmmakers emerged. Wajda led the way with his “war trilogy” — <i>A Generation</i> (1954); <i>Kanal</i> (1957), which wins prize at Cannes; and <i>Ashes and Diamonds</i> (1958), which wins major critical approval worldwide.</p> <p>1956 Gomulka appointed Polish leader.</p> <p>Exodus of Jews, mostly to Israel as result of rise of anti-Semitism.</p>
<p><i>Samson</i> (1961)</p>  <p><i>Samson</i>. The Jewish student, Jakub (Serge Merlin), accosted in the University courtyard by anti-Semitic Polish nationalist supporters.</p>	<p>1935-43 Warsaw.</p> <p>Rise of anti-Semitism and German invasion of Poland.</p> <p>Fate of a Jewish student with the onset of the Nazi extermination policy.</p>	<p>1960s Nationalist faction led by General Moczar makes bid for power in an overtly anti-Semitic campaign.</p> <p>1960s Revisionism about Holocaust in Poland.</p> <p>1965 Catholic church Vatican II council repudiates past anti-Semitism.</p>
<i>Landscape After</i>		

<p><i>Battle</i> (1970)</p>  <p><i>Landscape After Battle.</i> Concentration camp inmates come to terms with their imminent liberation.</p>	<p>1945 Liberation of concentration camp at the end of the war.</p> <p>Focus on a Polish and Jewish couple in the aftermath of release.</p>	<p>1967 Israeli-Arab Six-Day War. Poland breaks off relations with Israel.</p> <p>1968 Anti-Zionist campaign. Approximately 20,000 Jews emigrate.</p> <p>1968 Several filmmakers leave Poland. Film units restructured under nationalists.</p>
<p><i>The Wedding</i> (1973)</p>  <p><i>The Wedding.</i> The country Bride (Ewa Zietek) and the Groom (Daniel Olbrychski) in their wedding procession.</p>	<p>1901 Countryside: Austrian sector of partitioned Poland.</p> <p>Relations between gentry and peasants.</p> <p>Jewish presence in countryside.</p>	<p>1970s Restrictions on depiction of Polish-Jewish relations and “organized forgetting about Holocaust.”</p> <p>1970 Gdansk revolt. Strikes in Lodz.</p> <p>Gierek comes to power.</p>
<p><i>Promised Land</i> (1974)</p>  <p><i>Promised Land.</i> Business partners Moryc (Wojciech Pszoniak), Karol (Daniel Olbrychski), and Max (Andrzej Seweryn) celebrate securing a plot of land for their factory</p>	<p>1860s-90s Lodz.</p> <p>Rapid industrialization of Poland.</p> <p>Relations between German, Jewish, and Polish businesses and financiers.</p>	<p>1970s Film units reorganized. Greater artistic freedom.</p> <p>1977 Wajda’s <i>Man of Marble</i>. Film wins prize at Cannes 1978.</p> <p>1978 Election of Polish Pope John Paul II. He holds Mass at Auschwitz in 1979.</p> <p>1980 Emergence of “Solidarity” trade union.</p> <p>1981 Military coup. General Jaruzelksi comes to power. Martial law declared.</p> <p>1981 Wajda’s <i>Man of Iron</i>. Film wins prize at Cannes.</p> <p>1982 Some films made about Holocaust and Polish-Jewish relations.</p> <p>1983 Wajda removed from studio as it installs directors favorable to the regime. Resigns as head of Polish Film Association. Makes <i>Danton</i> in France and then a series of largely unsuccessful films under martial law in Poland.</p> <p>1984 Oxford conference on Polish-Jewish relations.</p> <p>1985 <i>Shoah</i> (Claude Lanzmann) shown on Polish TV.</p> <p>1987 Jan Blonski article, "Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto."</p>
<p><i>Korczak</i> (1990)</p>		

 <p><i>Korczak.</i> Dr Korczak (Wojciech Pszoniak) enters the walled off Warsaw Ghetto.</p>	<p>1939-42 Warsaw Ghetto.</p> <p>Inside a Jewish children's orphanage run by Dr Korczak.</p>	<p>1989 End of Soviet domination. Formation of the new Republic of Poland.</p> <p>1989 Wajda elected as Senator of the new Republic.</p> <p>1990 Heymann and Lanzmann viciously criticize <i>Korczak</i> and Wajda.</p>
<p><i>Holy Week</i> (1995)</p>  <p><i>Holy Week.</i> Jan (Wojciech Malajkat) hurries his former lover Irena (Beata Fudalej) away from the vicinity of the Ghetto to hide in his home.</p>	<p>1942-3 Warsaw.</p> <p>Fate of a Jewish woman seeking shelter with a Polish Catholic family during the Ghetto uprising.</p>	<p>1996 <i>Holy Week</i> wins award at Berlin 1996.</p>
<p><i>Pan Tadeusz</i> (1998)</p>  <p><i>Pan Tadeusz.</i> The Polish army joining forces with Napoleon against the Russians – scene from the film.</p>	<p>1811-12 Polish Romanticism.</p> <p>Period of revolt against Russian domination.</p> <p>Importance of position of Jews in society.</p>	<p>2000 <i>Neighbors</i> book, Jan Gross—on Jedwabne massacre (see note 92).</p> <p>2000 Wajda wins honorary Oscar for lifetime's work.</p>

Before examining Wajda's sustained exploration of Polish-Jewish relations, we should, at least in outline, consider the context that led to the two communities living side by side and the frictions that ensued.[19]

Jews in Poland

Jewish settlement in Central and Eastern Europe was actively encouraged for much of the 14th to 18th centuries. In the vast Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Jewish population was granted generous charters of privileges and virtual religious and cultural autonomy under a succession of kings.[20] Though always liable to the imposition of restrictions and expulsion from various towns and cities, their contribution to the culture and economic life of the Commonwealth were important to its development in the period up to the middle of the 17th century.[21] The subsequent

decay of governance that led to the partitions of 1772-95 ruptured this mutually beneficial relationship, and Jewish communities had mixed fortunes in the different sectors.[22]

In the East, Jews, in order to maintain their integrity as a people, or indeed to ensure their survival, reinforced their rigid social and religious structures, and increased their tendencies to be inward-looking. Especially in the rural areas they were “deeply conservative and resistant to assimilation” (Hoffman 1999:90-91). But there was also a minority of more western-oriented Jews who began to establish cultural contacts with their Polish neighbors. As the 19th century progressed a number of prominent Jewish reformers supported assimilation and the full participation of Jews in the Polish civic sphere. Jewish militias took part in uprisings against the Russians in 1830-31 and again in the 1850s and 60s, and there were even calls for the “total integration of Jews into Polish life” (Davies 2005:180-82).



Polish Light Cavalry (Uhlans) took part in the Battle of Grunwald (1410) – a celebrated victory against German-Prussian forces – and in many other battles up to 1939. This potent image of Romantic nationalism is from the 1830s uprising.

Romantic nationalism

At the same time Poles professed a form of Romantic nationalism that looked backwards to distant historical events in which they heroically fought off invaders in defence of their state (Glenny 1993:50-51). Yet a minority of Poles also realised the practicalities of a kind of “messianic alliance” in the struggle for freedom (Steinlauf 1997:10). In the 1830s the national poet Adam Mickiewicz created his most famous work, *Pan Tadeusz*, which calls for solidarity between Poles and Jews in the fight against oppression (Segel 1996:71). This work is still seen as an important pillar of modern Polish cultural identity.

But the moment passed with the failure of the 1863 uprising, and though Poles and Jews continued to live alongside each other, there was far less harmony. As the concept “brotherhood of *nations*” reveals, this was not one, integrated people but rather two different ethno-religious groups inhabiting the same lands. Tensions were inevitably magnified during the latter half of the 19th century when increasing industrialization and urbanization changed the balance of power. An additional factor was the influx of a large number of German industrialists who began to contest the place of the historical Polish ruling class (the *szlachta*) and challenge the



Marshal Jozef Pilsudski by Wojciech Kossak, 1928.

key economic position held by Jews for centuries. Furthermore, Jewish refugees fleeing Russia after the pogroms of the 1880s became a “conduit of socialist ideology” (Opalski and Bartal 1992:142).[23] As a result, society became more stratified on religious, ethnic, economic, and class lines (Davies 2005:186-89). New forms of Polish and Jewish nationalism arose which were mutually exclusive and antagonistic.

Poland between the wars

The acute flux during the First World War and the subsequent rebuilding of the new state in the inter-war period in Poland presents an extremely complex picture. On the Polish side there was competition between the pluralist ideas of Jozef Pilsudski,[24] and the “exclusivist” ideas of the Endecja party of Roman Dmowski.[25] On the Jewish side there was a plethora of views: the Zionists who espoused a homeland for Jews in Palestine as well as national rights within Poland; the Agudah who wanted alliance with Pilsudski; and the socialist Bund. For some, this period is an unremitting tale of growing anti-Semitism — of increased restrictions, violence, and pogroms inflicted on the Jewish community — that has been used to explain how the ensuing Holocaust could take place largely on Polish soil. Other historians present a broader picture that also takes account of economic and international pressures (see, for example, Davies (2005:Chapter 9)).

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The Holocaust

The fanatical attempt to exterminate a particular “race,” defying rational explanation, gives the Holocaust its singular intensity.[26][[open endnotes in new window](#)] That other segments of the population of Poland, in particular the Poles, suffered large-scale savagery and massacres during WWII is also not in doubt.[27] In a tragic irony, it is the Jewish and Polish survivors of that war and their descendants who have been least able to be reconciled to what took place in Poland. Jews understandably demand recognition of the special significance of the Holocaust, and they demand acknowledgement of the part played in it by Polish anti-Semitism. From a Jewish perspective, the increasingly active anti-Semitic mood of the inter-war period and the apparent passivity of Poles during the war, were contributing factors in the virtual elimination of the Jewish population under Nazi rule. Following racially motivated attacks immediately after the war and further pogroms in 1968, finally by the beginning of the 1970s most Jews felt that they could have no place in Poland’s future.[28] Some of their deep feelings of resentment and rejection have been expressed as a demand:

“Do tell us ... that what has happened to us was not our fault. We do not ask for anything else. But we do hope for such an acknowledgement.” [29]

But Poles, too, want recognition of their tragedy: of the systematic destruction of their nation, the murder of the intelligentsia and the political and military leadership, and the enslavement, deportation, and massacre of a large number of the population. They ask for acknowledgement of their attempts to resist the overwhelming forces ranged against them, and of the reign of terror imposed by the Nazis. They feel doubly victimized by accusations of collusion in the Holocaust.[30]

A fractured society

The Holocaust has continued to divide the two communities and many of the conflicts that disfigure Polish-Jewish relations are rooted in mutual recrimination over lack of solidarity, betrayal, and collaboration with their enemies in that time of crisis.[31] In 1987 some focus for the seemingly unending dispute emerged from a ground-breaking paper by Jan Blonski, “The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto,” reproduced in *My Brother’s Keeper?* (Polonsky 1990).[32] In this he directly confronts Polish reluctance to face the problem of the relationship between the two communities. Building on a vivid metaphor from Czeslaw Milosz of a “guardian mole” which burrows into the poet’s subconscious, exposing the deepest fear “that one might be counted among the helpers of death,” he asks that Poles accept moral responsibility for what happened in the Holocaust.[33] Blonski insists that they have to put aside their defensiveness, their denial of blame, and their excuse of extenuating circumstances, however legitimate these may be, and he confronts them with a number of troubling questions which I have paraphrased as:

Images from *A Generation*:



Stach (Tadeusz Lomnicki) exuberantly driving a cart to pick up lumber.



Stach's change of mood as he sees the

column of Jews.



The Jewish labor group being herded by Nazis with dogs.



Stach's epiphany.



Jasio (Tadeusz Janczar) passes a line of Polish citizen hung by the Nazis as part of the reign of terror.

How did you live together with Jews in the past?

- Have you “looked with acquiescence at the death of the Jews”?
- Have you assisted at the death of Jews?
- Have you helped to kill Jews?

He claims that only by considering these ethical issues in “an open and honest way,” can there be hope for reconciliation between the two communities (Blonski 1990:42). Blonski’s paper led to a series of discussions one effect of which, according to Polonsky, is that a new stage of Polish-Jewish relations could be thought possible and which moves beyond “strongly held competing and incompatible narratives of the past [to] reach some consensus” (2007:131).

Wajda seems to have anticipated this debate and Blonski’s questions which, I will argue, substantially inform an analysis of the cinematic treatment of Jewish-Polish relations throughout his career.

Epiphany

Suppression of memory after catastrophic events such as war, and in this case the Holocaust, is not uncommon and there is frequently a latency period during which time it is difficult, if not impossible, for people to cope with the resulting trauma. As Elsaesser argues, this often leads to the failure adequately to represent them (2001:195). However, Wajda seems to have been very aware of the necessity to broach the subject starting with his first feature, made just 10 years after the events depicted.

A Generation is set at the time of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising of 1943. Here, we encounter two very different characters, Stach and Jasio, who exemplify what Stevenson calls

“a Brechtian use of the double ... that allows a stress on the contradictions of resistance to emerge ...” (2003:78).

Where Stach is naïve and recklessly oblivious to the harsh reality of occupation, Jasio is complex and terrified of the extreme danger that confronts all Poles. This doubling allows Wajda to provide contrasting views of the possibilities of resistance to the Nazis and, in turn, support for the Jews. Audiences identifying with one or the other are encouraged to see the contradictions of their position.

As each undergoes an “epiphany,” they become acutely conscious of the imminent fate of the Jews in Poland. For Stach this occurs in a remarkable sequence where he is allowed to drive a cart to pick up timber for the carpentry shop where they both work.[34]

It is a bright sunny day and cheerful fairground music accompanies shots taken over the horses’ shoulders interspersed with low-angle shots of Stach laughing and encouraging them with whirrs and whistles. Clearly he is exhilarated by the sense of temporary freedom from work and the power of the horses under his control.

As the cart passes under a bridge, Stach is forced to swerve sharply to avoid a column of people, men and women, old and young, carrying picks and shovels, being beaten and herded by guards with dogs and guns. We can just pick out the compulsory star of David on one or two of the figures shuffling, we infer, to their deaths.

The dramatic change of mood, the shadow literally and figuratively falling over Stach, has no commentary. The music changes sharply, becoming laden with doom, and the sound of the whip takes on a sinister meaning. We now recognize



Jasio's terrified reaction.



Abram (Zygmunt Hobot), a Jewish escapee from the Ghetto asks Jasio for help.



Jasio refuses to help Abram.

the irony of the merry-go-round music which refers to another poem by Milosz in which he contrasts the indifference of the living, enjoying a fun fair, with “those dying alone, forgotten by the world.”[35] In the space of just 15 seconds Wajda shows how Stach has been forced to confront the reality of life for Jews in Warsaw under occupation, something which quickly leads him on to join the resistance and support the Jews.

Jasio, on the other hand, is acutely aware of the German reign of terror. On his way to work he passes a line of hanging figures — Polish civilians executed and displayed as an example to a large crowd that watches in silence. He is filled with fear and refuses to help Stach and the resistance.[36] This fear persists even when he is visited by Abram, a former friend, who has escaped from the ghetto and has come to ask for shelter.

When Jasio refuses to help — blaming his “Jewish appearance” which would make it impossible for him to be safely hidden — Abram silently slips away. There is a long take of the dark street and crashing piano chords and drums, signalling Abram’s fate.[37] It is at this point that Jasio realises he can no longer remain “neutral”. Even in the face of extreme danger, his guilt over the abandonment of Abram drives him to join Stach and his compatriots.

Haltorf notes that like a number of Jewish characters in Wajda’s films, “Abram tests his fellow countrymen” (2011:80). Some commentators have suggested that Wajda felt most closely attuned to Jasio since his own experiences during the war were similar.[38] Stevenson is more insightful in noting that Wajda seems to have been “troubled by a kind of nagging guilt over something not quite definable” (2003:83). The guilt that Jasio feels for having turned Abram away inflects Wajda’s work with a more generalised guilt for the way Poles forsook the Jews in their time of need.

Visual and aural motifs of fun fair and carousel are repeated in this film and later in *Holy Week*. Though they should crystallise the indifference of Poles to the fate of the Jews behind the ghetto walls, Wajda seems to weaken this meaning or at least to balance it with evidence of Polish support for the uprising. Stach’s growing involvement with the resistance and his attraction to Dorota, the leader of the group, occurs as they wander among the stalls of the fair. The carousel itself is the backdrop to the group’s meeting to plot their effort to provide aid to the Jews. In *Holy Week*, Julek, a member of the resistance, uses the swing on the carousel to spy over the ghetto wall and work out where they might break in.

But is the criticism of Wajda’s partiality just? There has been a debate about whether or not the fair in Krasinski Square was actually in operation at the time of the uprising. Haltorf cites convincing evidence that indeed it was, yet the same evidence shows that it was used “by the underground fighters as an observation point that enabled them to follow the struggles in the ghetto” (2011:83-4). Thus Wajda seems to have been historically accurate while perhaps still giving too much weight to the support given by Poles rather than to their indifference.

A Generation was severely treated by the censor on a number of counts. As it was to be released on the 10th anniversary of birth of the Polish Communist Party it was required to show the party in a good light. In practice, the Home Army or Armia Krajowa (AK) was the main resistance movement in Poland during the war and had been more active than the communists in helping the Jews. However, after the war they were considered the enemies of socialist Poland and the much smaller and less effective communist People’s Guard was credited with a greater role than the AK. Thus, this history is reversed in the film.[39] Stevenson also cites a particular scene, cut from the release, that refers

to the Holocaust and Polish relations to it as being too negative for the censors (2003:75). Despite these, and other, distortions of history — Haltof calls it “a work tainted by political compromise” (2011:78) — I would argue that the film marks the beginning of Wajda’s quest to awaken a moral conscience in his audience and to break the silence in Poland about the Holocaust. In so doing he laid the foundations for pursuing Blonski’s questions.

Living together

Wajda’s examination of how Poles and Jews lived together in the past may be seen in a number of his films set at critical points of Polish history. *Pan Tadeusz* takes place in 1811-12 when many Poles still hoped the alliance with Napoleon would lead to the overthrow of Russian domination; *The Promised Land* is set during the second half of the 19th century, after another failed uprising in 1863, and during the rapid growth of industrialization in Poland; *The Wedding* moves on to the turn of the century when quixotic elements of the Polish gentry tried to form an alliance with the peasants; and, finally, *Samson* and *Korczak* chart the increasing internal strife of the 1930s in the run up to the Nazi invasion. Each of these films, to a greater or lesser extent, contain elements of the intertwined Polish Catholic and Jewish communities and, taken together, trace the arc of a significant stretch of Jewish history in Poland.

The most recent of these films goes back the furthest in time. *Pan Tadeusz* (1999) is based on an epic poem written around 1833-34 by Poland’s eminent Romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz.[40] Written while he was in exile in Paris, the purpose of the work was to try and restore a sense of unity and hope among Poles at a time of great turbulence following the partitions of 1795 and the failed uprising of 1831 (Segel 1996:164). Set two decades earlier, during the Napoleonic Wars, it tells of two feuding Polish-Lithuanian clans united eventually through marriage in a common cause against the Russian occupiers.

The main themes of the poem are designed to induce patriotic fervour among Poles: the evocation of the homeland and nature; the recounting of past victories in battles; a nostalgic vision of life lived by the gentry; and a story of love between the beautiful Zofia and the handsome noble Tadeusz. On close study, however, it is evident that the “seemingly peripheral character of the Jewish musician and innkeeper, Jankiel” has an important, if not central, position in the story (Shallcross 1995:523). He is a man trusted by the Polish gentry, at the centre of communal life, deeply involved in plotting an insurrection, and dedicated to the preservation of Polish national traditions (Hertz and Dobroszycki 1988:243).

Jankiel appears at various critical points throughout the poem.[41] In Book IV there is a description of the inn and a characterization of Jankiel himself (Mickiewicz 1986:164-66):

“The Jew was old, and through the years had gained
A name for honesty ...
He kept a strict account, nor cheated ever ...
As a musician Jankiel was renowned ...
And especially loved the ballads of the nation ...

Images from *Pan Tadeusz*:



Adam Mickiewicz (Krzysztof Kolberger)
reading from his poem to a group of Polish
émigrés in Paris.

He was a welcome guest and counsel giver ...
And was a loyal Pole by reputation ...”



Zofia (Alicja Bachleda) pleads with Jankiel (Wladyslaw Kowalski) to play for them.

Later, in Book VII, Jankiel (‘whom all loved’) intervenes in an argument between representatives of the two factions. He uses his eloquence to prevent a fight breaking out among the gentry, though he describes himself as “nought but a Jew.”

Most significant, however, is a long section near the end of the poem (Book XII), when Jankiel plays the dulcimer at the wedding of Tadeusz and Zofia (Mickiewicz 1986:562-68). Though at first:

“They urged him on to play, but he refused;
His hands were stiff, he said, and little used ...”

Zofia brings him the hammers and again pleads with him to play for her wedding day:



Jankiel finally begins to play.

“She curtsied: ‘Jankiel, play for me,’ she pressed,
‘It’s my betrothal, Jankiel, won’t you play,
You said you’d play upon my wedding day!’”

He finally agrees for her sake and after some preliminary music, plays a patriotic polonaise they all recognise. The “girls long to dance and the boys can scarce keep still,” but he moves on:

“Then all the strings like trumpets blared,
And from the trumpets to the heavens sped
That march of triumph: *Poland is not dead!*”

Jankiel is overwhelmed by the music and his audience’s response:

“... He sobbed the honest Jew
He loved our country like a patriot true”



Jankiel escorted from the house by two of the bridesmaids.

Though Jankiel appears and disappears throughout the text, this final section completes his transformation from outsider. He has become, most clearly, “an integral part of the Polish community” (Segel 1996:29) or as Schama puts it a “natural .. figure in the landscape” (1992). He remains a Jew in dress, religious practice, and association, but above all he is a Polish patriot. Mickiewicz creates a vision of Jewish life in Poland — of separateness but not alienation — of two communities finding aspects of life that are mutually compatible and beneficial (Opalski and Bartal 1992:18-20).

Wajda, by his own account, had wanted for a long time to make a film of *Pan Tadeusz*.^[42] The opportunity came finally in the late 1990s when finance became available to approach such an epic subject. At the same time, Poland was beset with financial and political scandals that threatened to destroy its fragile democracy. Wajda’s treatment of this masterpiece of Polish poetry concentrated on creating a tale of resolved disputes and restored unity.^[43]

While it is possible to analyze *Pan Tadeusz* giving hardly a mention to Jankiel, ^[44] I would argue that this film continued Wajda’s examination of how Poles and Jews lived together in the past—in this case going back to a period of general accord. Though his handling of Jankiel is less defined than in the source poem, he retains three key registers: Jankiel as “elder statesman” in the tavern where the gentry come to drink; Jankiel as “honest advisor” helping to resolve disputes; and above all at the wedding concert where Jankiel is clearly a beloved part of the Polish community.

Mazierska is right to lament Wajda's truncated treatment of Mickiewicz's long and elegaic description of Jankiel's playing of the dulcimer (2001:175). However, it is difficult to envision how the meaning of the different phases of the music could be expressed in the absence of words, even if it could be reconstructed. And though Wajda does not attempt this, nonetheless important elements remain in this final scene: the tuning of the instruments to raise expectations; the central position of Jankiel as he emerges from the mansion, flanked by two bridesmaids and their escorts; Zofia's impassioned plea to Jankiel to play; his initial hesitation that suggests modesty; his moment of preparatory concentration that stresses the importance of the scene; and the final dance inspired by his music that brings the community together.[45] As Stevenson rightly concludes, *Pan Tadeusz* speaks of "the continuing and necessary affinity [of Poles] to their past, to Polish history, and, in Jankiel, directly to a shared Polish-Jewish history" (2003:91).



The textile factory of Karl Wilhelm Scheibler in Lodz in the 1870s. Wajda filmed scenes from *The Promised Land* in the factory in 1970.

.....

Pan Tadeusz looks, it must be admitted with some rural nostalgia, at a time of relative concord between different elements of Polish society — this is the start of the period when Poles and Jews would be considered truly a "brotherhood of nations." In contrast, the next film to be considered is a meticulous evocation of the turmoil that followed rapid urbanization and industrialization in various Central and Eastern European regions. Wajda also turned to a literary text, this time to the relatively unknown realist novel *The Promised Land* (1898) by Wladyslaw Reymont.[46] Set in Lodz during the decades after 1870, this covers the most intense period of industrialization that saw the small town transformed into the main textile production centre of the Russian Empire.[47] Skilled German weavers, entrepreneurs and mill owners, Polish peasants, and Jewish artisans, entrepreneurs, and petty merchants flocked to the town and were encouraged to settle in this "promised land" (Bechtel 2006:80).

The city that grew out of this development was ethnically diverse and "noted for its relative tolerance" (Young and Kaczmarek 2008:58). But it also boasted gross inequalities. Bloated German, Polish, and Jewish industrialists displayed their immense wealth with elaborate mansions that jostled the tenements of the impoverished middle class and the slums of the desperate peasant laborers. These inequalities led to labor unrest and eventually to a violently suppressed general strike.[48]

The Polish gentry, living in their landed estates, seem to have been taken unawares and were by-passed by the headlong rush into modernity happening on their doorstep. These changes in circumstance and the nationalist ideas that were taking hold at the time provoked increasing antipathies. Rather than being

seen as beneficial to Polish society and prosperity, Germans and Jews began to be resented for their newly acquired status and economic strength. In particular, the euphoric communalism of the Warsaw demonstrations in 1861 gave way to the anti-Jewish riots of 1881 (Opalski and Bartal 1992:100).[49] The right-wing Polish nationalist political party, the *Endecja*, was founded shortly after, eventually to be led by the anti-Semitic Roman Dmowski.

Such is the political context of Reymont's novel. Though Reymont had a fascination for the city and the "joyous cacophony" of modernization he was undoubtedly influenced by the views of Dmowski and "unquestionably does make use of the clichés and phrases of anti-Semitic discourse" (Bechtel 2006:89).

The context of production of Wajda's film version, *Promised Land* (1974), has some parallels: recently there had been a rise in anti-Jewish sentiment leading to a large-scale purge of Jews from the ranks of the Communist party; a workers' rebellion in 1970 had been brutally put down; and the early years of the subsequent Gierek government had seen significant industrial expansion and modernization.[50] By his own account, Wajda was captivated by the realism and precision of the novel's description of the city and its industrial life and processes. He saw the energy and enterprise of the three central characters as an antidote to the growing disappointment of the Gierek era. And he was intent on showing his view of the realities of industrial capitalism: the interdependency of different sections and strata of the community, and the contrast between excessive wealth and the poverty, misfortune and the abuse of individuals that accompanied it (Fogler 1996a).

Wajda's screenplay had to negotiate a fine line between the communist censors' resistance to acknowledging Poland's pre-war multiculturalism, their insistence on displaying the failures of capitalism, and yet their promotion of a "get rich now" ethos (Michnik 2000:154). He succeeded, Wajda notes, perhaps with tongue in cheek, because after all, the film was "progressive." [51]

Wajda filmed on site in the factories and mansions of Lodz, many of which remained largely in their 19th century state, constructing a masterly portrait of the brutal milieu of raw capitalism unfettered by the rule of law. Using distorting wide angle lenses for the factory buildings, spewing smoke from their towering stacks and consuming lines of submissive workers in their enormous maws, he captures the grand scale of the industrial world. Endless rows of mechanized looms, retreating into the distance, are served by young peasant girls fresh from their farms. Movement is rapid and constant, and the music of clattering machines and pounding pistons drive the action forward to an irresistible rhythm. Accidents happen—a limb is torn off here, a man killed elsewhere—and widows left to pawn their meagre possessions or beg for food.

Images from *The Promised Land*:



Inside the vast textile factory – peasant girls at the looms



Workers consumed by the factory.



Moryc, Karol, and Max size up the women of Lodz displaying their wealth in the theatre.

Factories fail, the owners burn them down for the insurance money, or, in one instance, commit suicide. Meanwhile the successful factory owners and financiers are wealthy beyond their needs.

Against this background, the central plot concerns three main characters: Moryc Welt, a small-time Polish Jewish entrepreneur with partial access to the Jewish financial community; Karol Borowiecki, scion of a family of the Polish Catholic *szlachta* and manager of a large textile mill; and Max Baum, son of a small-time German mill owner. The three close friends, sharing an apartment, constantly conspire and deal to make enough money to start up their own factory. They argue and fight—it seems they will do anything to achieve their ends—but they are also forever watchful as each is subject to temptation to cut out the other two.



Moryc with a bloody nose after a fight with Max.

Max laughing at their common plight.

Thus the elements of greedy capitalism are all present, and to some extent the film may be seen simply as an “apocalyptic spectacle of capitalism’s failures” as Coates has it (1997:224). In this respect, it looks back to Dickens in the quirky, downtrodden clerks and servants; Chaplin’s *Modern Times* (1936) in the ever-present and rapacious machinery; and realist works such as Zola’s *Germinal* (1885) in the plight of the working masses. But Coates finds other, more disturbing, elements. He argues that, while Wajda “consciously espous[es] the liberal intellectual commitment to do justice to the Jews,” he is loath to relinquish the use of stereotypes (222). Though Wajda recuperates the character of Moryc, who, in contrast to the novel, ultimately remains loyal to his Polish and German partners, Coates maintains that he caricatures the Jewish industrialists as greedy and ignorant, and their wives as showy, bejewelled and excessively sensual.[52]



Moryc negotiating loans for their factory.

This is an important comment especially given the damaging criticism of the film, from some sources, as anti-Semitic.[53] So, was Wajda, inadvertently or not, exhibiting a lack of sensitivity to the Polish-Jewish community in his film? Or was he illustrating the anti-Semitism of the time in such a way as to provoke discussion—to force his audience to reflect on Blonski’s question about how Poles and Jews lived together in the past? I think this question can be approached through a number of key scenes.

The first is set in a restaurant where Moryc sweeps in, gathering information left and right, busily darting from his table and back, trying to set up deals. The background is a hubbub of Jewish businessmen, dealing, arguing, bobbing and bowing. The language is a mix of German, Russian, Yiddish, and Polish. Moryc himself, concerned with trying to raise money for the factory venture, boasts (optimistically) that they have a loan.[54] It is possible to read this scene as

stereotyping Moryc and the Jewish entrepreneurs, in contrast to other scenes that individuate the Polish gentry and German mill-owners. However, Moryc is a fully rounded character and a clearly delineated part of the financial community. It is at least arguable that this is a realistic depiction of the energy and dynamism of the financial system at the time that was essential to the rapidly expanding economy.



Müller's dreadful daughter Mada (Bożena Dykiel) displays her jewels.



The opulent Lucy Zucker (Kalina Jedrusik) flaunts her husband's wealth.

The second scene is set in the Theatre at a variety show. All the rich and famous of Lodz are present—factory owners, financiers, and the three striving friends. The theatre, like the restaurant, is a place of business and here we see each section of society only interested in flaunting wealth and success—the stage performances are incidental. When news arrives of a change in tariff that will affect the mill owners there is no more of a Jewish reaction than there is a Polish or German reaction — some will gain others lose. In general the film is more balanced than the original novel in that it shows the greed of capitalism is all its forms: ruthless mill owners; lack of communal values; exploitation of position; and the self-interest and separatism of the different parts of society.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Coates' claim that the film especially caricatures the Jewish section of the population does not seem at all justified:



A dignified Zucker (Jerzy Nowak) pleads with Karol to confirm he is not having an affair with Lucy.

- Karol is as greedy for wealth as the Germans and Jews;
- Müller a German factory owner shows as much cultural ignorance as Grünspan the Jew who has not heard of Victor Hugo;
- all the wives and daughters at the theatre display their jewels with equal excess; and
- Kessler the German could hardly be more markedly corrupt and sensual.

Wajda's treatment of the Polish, Jewish and German communities in the film is reasonably even-handed. He shows how the communities were to a large degree interdependent, and though tinged with antipathy and casual anti-Semitism, society functioned as well as could be expected in this frenetic atmosphere of "predatory capitalism" (Falkowska 2007:150). I would agree with Bechtel that "one ought to see his Jewish characters within the frame of his conscious aesthetics of caricature and exaggeration" for all the nations and classes (Bechtel 2006:91).

Coates, however, is unforgiving. He maintains that after the extreme persecution of Jews in Poland, greater sensitivity is required: their representation "cannot be entirely innocent now" (Coates 1997:227). This complex criticism cannot easily be dismissed. It seems, in particular, to be directed at Wajda's portrait of Karol's Jewish mistress, Lucy Zucker, which certainly embodies an extravagant portrait of lasciviousness and abandoned sensuality. In an almost unwatchable scene, set in a private railway carriage, Lucy consumes handfuls of greasy food while engaging in fellatio with Karol.[55][[open endnotes in new window](#)]



The tyrannical Bucholz, Karol's boss, threatens him with his stick.

Ostrowska's analysis (2000) takes this argument further by considering the imbalance between Wajda's treatment of Polish and Jewish women, which is also found in some of his other films. Here, Karol's fiancée, Anka, the daughter of impoverished nobility, is the essence of Polish female purity. First seen at her father's idyllic country house—blonde-haired, demure, dressed generally in pastel colors—she complements the image of a "harmonious, perfect Poland" (123). In a number of sequences Wajda's contrasting of the angelic Anka with the exotically erotic Lucy can only be deliberate. His personal imprint on the film serves to highlight only the "otherness" of the "alien Jew" in this time of multiple tensions.

Furthermore, in Wajda's screenplay, the cause of Karol's moral decline—and by inference the decline of the Polish nobility—is his relationship with Lucy. Her jealous husband burns down the partners' factory forcing Karol to abandon Anka and marry Mada, Müller's frightful daughter. In deviating from the novel, where it is Moryc's schemes that cause Karol's downfall, Wajda shifts the blame onto an exotic female thus amplifying "the supposedly destructive role of Jews in the history of the Polish nation" (127).



Lucy and Karol on the train to Berlin.

Wajda was not immune to the excessive criticism of the film and released a second, cut-down, version in 2000 which softens the portrait of Lucy in particular.[56] However, he has never acknowledged that some of the cuts may have been in response to accusations of stereotyping and instead has put



Our first view of the 'angelic' Anka (Anna Nehrebecka) at the family home.

Images from *The Wedding*:



The wedding party at the farmhouse, peasants and gentry mingling.



Moses with his daughter.

forward a range of explanations: the need to shorten the film; his desire to restructure it; and his decision to reduce the role of Lucy in respect for the memory of the actress who had recently died. Stevenson is probably correct in concluding that Wajda re-edited the film because “he became aware that something of a tradition of Jewish stereotyping had entered into his imagery” (2003:92n9). In general, I would argue, though Wajda may have been guilty of an unconscious insensitivity towards the Jewish population he was not simply exploiting stereotypes to guarantee popular appeal in Poland as Mazierska claims (see footnote 12). His alterations to the novel not only toned-down its overt anti-Semitism, but created a realistic picture of the period, exposing heightened communal and class tensions, casual racism, and the onrush of modernism.

The period covered by the film ranges from the apogee of Polish-Jewish relations in the middle of the 19th century—the height of the “brotherhood of nations”—through its rapid decline over the next three or four decades. The film could have been expected to encourage a contemporary spectator first, to acknowledge the evidence of growing anti-Semitism and, secondly, to observe some of the fallacious generalizations on which it was grounded. However, the film aroused contrasting reactions—accused in Poland of being anti-Polish and abroad of being anti-Semitic—and became mired in the heated disputes previously described. As such, it failed in its intent to provoke serious debate on the Jewish tragedy in Poland. A plausible explanation for this put forward by Falkowska is that while such debates were common in the West in the 1970s when *The Promised Land* was released, they only started in Poland in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Falkowska 2007:151). It has taken several decades before the film can be judged on its merits.

.....

Produced a year earlier than *The Promised Land*, Wajda’s *The Wedding* (1972) moves us on slightly to the beginning of the 20th century and to the countryside around Krakow which, at that time, was in the Austrian partition. The film was made in response to what Wajda called the “catastrophe” of 1968 that included the venomous anti-Semitic campaign of the Polish nationalists and the disarray following the breakdown of the Gomulka regime (Michnik 2000:151). For this purpose, he adapted an experimental verse play by Stanislaw Wyspianski, using its strong symbolism that reflects on Poland’s past, to comment on the state of the nation in the 1970s.

The play is based on an actual wedding party at which Wyspianski was present. Reduced to its essence, it is a debate about the Polish nation, illustrating the gulf between the peasant masses and the intelligentsia.[57] It recounts a not unusual story of the time when a member of the intelligentsia, in this case a poet, marries a country girl (Peterkiewicz 1998:7-9). The poet’s friends from the city attend a wild, drunken, wedding party in a farmhouse where they mingle with the locals. Over the course of the night the guests are visited by “ghosts”—symbols of Poland’s past, and for a short time it appears as if, through solidarity between the classes, they might be stirred to revolt against foreign domination. But, with the sobering dawn, they sink back into dream-like apathy.

Wajda’s film is a swirling, lively dance in which groups of figures move among three or four rooms of the farmhouse. He follows the pattern of the play with short scenes of brisk dialogue between the characters punctuated by fluid entrances and exits through doorways, all to the rhythm of the country dance music. In this respect, the adaptation is faithful to the original, though there were many contemporary criticisms of inserted scenes and changes to the order of scenes and the text.[58] Revisiting the film in the 1990s, Coates is highly



The Priest (Mieczyslaw Czechowicz) tries to intervene between Moses and the drunken Czepiec (Franciszek Pieczka).

critical, calling it a “grimly vulgar Marxist version of the class struggle” (Coates 1992:131). I would argue that despite the rather impoverished dialogue (and poor sub-titles) of the screenplay this is an important, if enigmatic, film and an interesting continuation of Wajda’s exploration of Polish-Jewish relations.[59] Even Coates acknowledges that the treatment of “the Jewish question” is “haunting” (ibid.).

From the outset Wajda creates an eerie, phantom world that surrounds the warmly lit farmhouse where the party is in full flow.[60] He follows the play’s stage directions that call for the interior walls to be painted a greyish-blue causing the characters at certain times to take on a ghostly pallor. Outside are misty fields and a garden where ranks of “straw-men” appear to stand guard.[61] A sinister twanging theme is repeated throughout the film whenever the camera strays outside the house or when characters look, always apprehensively, out the windows.[62]



Moses (Mieczyslaw Voit) arrives.



Greeted by the Groom (Daniel Olbrychski)

Through Wajda’s depiction of the unnamed Jewish innkeeper and his daughter, Rachel, we see the position of Jews in Polish rural society and experience the way they were treated at this time.[63] At his first entrance the innkeeper presents an alien figure. Exotically hatted, he stoops to pass through a doorway and then seems to crouch anxiously to one side, never joining the revellers. In contrast to this dark figure, the Groom, colorfully dressed, strides easily through another doorway which frames a religious icon and a crucifix endowing him with the innate authority of the Catholic church.[64]

The dialogue accompanying this meeting is:

“Groom: Here’s Moses come to join the spree

Jew: I’m rather shy of company—

Groom: But aren’t we friends? Why should you be?

Jew: It’s just that we’re the kind of friends who don’t much care for one another.”

There follows a friendly conversation, much abbreviated in the film, in which the Jew discusses his daughter: a cultured woman, clever and generous to the peasants, who longs to dance and join in the celebrations. Thus Wajda sets up the Jew’s position as an outsider and, despite the Groom’s warm welcome, his uneasy relationship with the intelligentsia.



The intelligentsia in their corner.



Rachel (Maja Komorowska) floats across the darkened fields.



Rachel arrives outside the farmhouse and looks through the window.

At last, Rachel makes her entrance across the misty fields, exotic in black dress and red shawl, again accompanied by the ethereal music. She claims she was carried there by:

“Rachel: A little cloudlet ... a wisp of mist, the breath of eve.”

And here, the Jew’s bitterness comes out for the first time as he gives permission for Rachel to join the party, before exiting the scene:

“Jew: Why shouldn’t Rachel, too, carouse? A Jew, I’m used to being reviled, but her, at least, you must respect. She’s not ashamed to be my child.”

The Jew later on has another important scene with the Priest who is the landlord of his tavern. He explains that he cannot pay the Priest until he, in turn, is paid by Czepiec, the headman of the village. Czepiec, in a drunken rant, blames the Jew for his debt, curses him, and tries to assault him. Wajda cuts from the ensuing brawl to a corner of the house where the intelligentsia shift awkwardly in their chairs, not sure how to deal with this embarrassing situation.

For the villagers at least, the Jew is not only alien but also an object of suspicion—hated as a trader/innkeeper who they believe will cheat them. Like Jankiel in *Pan Tadeusz*, he is easily accepted by the gentry but here is not a welcome guest among the country folk—never an integral part of the community.

However, in his characterization of Rachel, Wajda reveals a different perspective on Polish-Jewish relations. Like her father, she is liminal in this society, but in a different way. In her conversations with the visiting Poet, she is poetical, mystical, and prophetic: likening the dancing guests to moths who circle a flame that will surely “incinerate their wings.”

In one scene fashioned by Wajda, she stands flattened against a wall trying to join the dance, but as each prospective partner approaches, he turns aside to pick someone else. Finally, the Poet dances with her and as they swirl around the floor, the other dancers stand back and look on silently disapproving. Then Rachel dances alone as the music fades to a stop, and only the Poet applauds. She is also alien and shunned—yet she is nonetheless regarded with awe or superstitious fear rather than hatred.



Rachel left alone at the dance.



The Poet (Andrzej Lapicki) dances with Rachel.

Rachel appears at intervals through the film, always with the Poet who may be taken as Wyspianski's alter ego. At first, their relationship is playful, as they flirt with words, but then their exchanges become more caustic as she disdains his poetry and his professions of love. But, finally, she relents, confessing that she has "imbibed" his love. She tells him that if he is to create his great work he must invite the strawman to the party. This initiates the subsequent appearance of various heroes and villains from Poland's past. Thus, as Wisse notes, by personifying "the magic power of poetry," Rachel initiates "a confrontation between Poland's past and present" (Wisse 2003:110). In this she presents a constructive role in the play/film as opposed to the representation of Jewish women as overly sensual and erotic in many other works.

In the urban environment of Lodz in *Promised Land* Polish-Jewish relations can be seen to have deteriorated markedly by the end of the 19th century. So also in the countryside of *The Wedding* Jews have become outsiders, either reviled or feared. Wajda's films ask his audience to reflect on these changes and to consider the loss to Polish culture from the absence of Jews.

.....

When Poland finally regained full statehood two decades later (1921—see footnote 7), friction between the two communities intensified. Even though the official stance towards the Jewish population became more liberal when Jozef Pilsudski came to power, Eva Hoffman theorises that, in the inter-war period, "Jewishness" took on a political and ideological tinge. It became distinct from a Polish identity, such that Jews could be "mentally detached or expelled from the symbolic universe of a self-contained Polish state" (Hoffman 1999:169). This perhaps encouraged the right-wing *Endecja* movement, especially after the death of Pilsudski in 1935, to push demands on the Jewish population for either total cultural assimilation or emigration.[65] Though economic and political factors—such as the high proportion of Jewish ownership of major industries, their prominence in the professions, and their links with Communism—could easily be exploited, especially during the Depression, the movement essentially was racially motivated.[66] It resulted in sections of Polish society trying to correct what they characterized as an imbalance of wealth and influence, by boycotts and by forcing Jews to accept a quota system in the universities and professions.

Wajda made two films—*Samson* (1961) and *Korczak* (1990)—that are primarily about life in Warsaw, especially in the ghetto, during the war. In each film the protagonist is a Jewish Pole and, as we shall see later, there is much critical and academic discussion about Wajda's representation of these characters—for example, Baron notes "Korczak's bifurcated Polish-Jewish identity" (Baron 2007:45)—and the competing Jewish and Catholic martyrologies of the films. For now, we will concentrate on the short pre-war sequences in these films which reveal even more clearly Wajda's understanding of the complexities of the relationships between Poles and Jews at that time.

Novelist Kazimierz Brandys, a law student at the University of Warsaw from 1934 to 1938, reflects this stage of Polish-Jewish history in his novella, *Samson* (1948).[67] This tells the story of Jakub Gold, a new student at the University, who arrives in the middle of an anti-Jewish demonstration. He is taunted and attacked by the other students. During the ensuing brawl he accidentally kills one of them and is sentenced to prison. At the beginning of the war, the prison

is bombed and Jakub escapes along with the other prisoners. The remainder of the story follows his downward trajectory from one form of incarceration to another, each more confining than the last. He retreats into increasing passivity and torpor until, like the Biblical Samson, he at last gathers his strength and attacks his oppressors, killing himself in the process.

Constrained by the “schematic ideological determinism” of the Socialist Realist literature of the time (Rogerson 1987:367), important themes emerge nonetheless. First is the fundamental importance of Jakub’s appearance—it governs the course of his life as he comes to realise that people find his looks “suggestive of the characteristics they hate in Jews” (Adamczyk-Garbowska 2003:182). Secondly, the novel openly records the racism that characterized Polish-Jewish relations in the lead up to the war, and the active participation of some Poles in the persecution of Jews during the war.

Wajda is faithful to these aspects of the novel in his film, *Samson*. In the opening section, without resorting to stereotypes, he emphasises the importance to Jakub of his appearance.[68] For the first four minutes the camera tracks Jakub from behind as he hesitantly enters the University courtyard on his first day. Ignorant of the nature of a demonstration that is taking place there, he bypasses the crowd and enters a lecture theatre. Here he witnesses three bullies who throw a Jewish student out of the main area reserved for non-Jews. When the bullies confront him, he retreats to the courtyard where he is surrounded by a hate-spewing mob, taunted, punched and finally pinned against a wall by their nationalist banners.



Samson: Nationalist students...



...pin Jakub against the wall.

Wajda has withheld this moment dramatically to increase the impact of Jakub’s appearance when, at last, we see his dark, gaunt face. We perceive he is Jewish by the reaction of the others to him and we now know his appearance is crucial to his survival.

In this opening sequence, Wajda illustrates the passive acceptance by some Poles of the racist treatment of the Jews in this period. When Jakub enters the University for the first time, the doorman warns him that the meeting going on is not for his “kind” but does nothing about the fascist demonstration in the courtyard. In the lecture theatre, most of the students watch inertly while the bullies force two Jews into a segregated area. When the professor enters, he does nothing about the obvious segregation in his class. And, in the courtyard again, just one student attempts, ineffectually, to prevent Jakub being attacked. Wajda has been quite clear up to this point about the anti-Semitism prevailing among students of the University. As we shall see later, more complex issues of identity and representation—how people are viewed by others, including the audience—and the Polish-Jewish relationship during the war, emerge in the course of the film.

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Janusz Korczak (the pen name of Dr Henryk Goldszmit)—a paediatrician, author of children’s books, broadcaster, and advocate of children’s rights—was a much-loved figure in Poland before the war and remains important to both



Korczak making one of his 'Old Doctor' broadcasts



Receptionist does a 'double take' when she sees Korczak.



The director (Andrzej Kopiczynski) equivocates.

Polish Catholic and Jewish cultures.[69] From a family of acculturated Jews, he was heavily influenced by his father who long advocated the belief that it was possible to be “both a loyal Jew and a loyal citizen of one’s country” (Lifton 2005:section 3).

In 1910 he met Stefa Wilczynska with whom he established and co-directed a Jewish orphanage in Warsaw.[70] A few years later he also set up a Polish orphanage called “Our Home” which was directed by Maryna (or Maria) Falska. During the 1930s he broadcast a popular radio program under the deliberately secular name “The Old Doctor,” dispensing advice on the upbringing of children irrespective of faith. When Warsaw was occupied by the Germans at the start of the war, Korczak was forced to relocate his Jewish orphanage into the ghetto. After two years of terrible hardship and deprivation, the surviving children, some 200, Korczak and Stefa were transported by rail to Treblinka where they were killed in the gas chambers.

Several attempts were made in Poland after the war to produce a film based on Korczak’s life, but the various treatments were stifled by censorship.[71] The usual grounds for refusal were because of their

“negative representation of wartime Polish behavior, attitudes of Poles toward Jews, and the explicit, accusatory portrayal of the perpetrators—the Germans” (Haltorf 2011:190).

Aleksander Ford, head of Poland’s national film institute, strongly supported the project, but when he was purged from the communist party in 1968 because of his Jewish roots, proposals to make the film in Poland were dropped.[72] Wajda had considered making a film about Korczak in the early 1980s and commissioned a script from film-maker Agnieszka Holland in 1983.[73] The events of 1989, among which were the anti-Jewish slurs included in a widely-published homily by Cardinal Glemp, Roman Catholic Primate of Poland, and the resurgence of anti-Semitism in Poland, spurred Wajda to return to this project with some urgency. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the election of Poland’s first post-war democratic government provided the freedom he needed to fulfil his vision in the film *Korczak* (1990).

Wajda wanted to focus specifically on the martyrdom of Korczak and most of the action of the film takes place within the Warsaw Ghetto in the two years leading up to the final journey to Treblinka. But the opening sequence of scenes set before the war form a prologue which, as Stevenson remarks,

“demonstrates [Wajda’s] developing need to open up the Blonskian stricture to describe how Poles lived with Jews in the past in ways that allowed acquiescence with the Holocaust” (Stevenson 2003:89).

Korczak is introduced in an intimate shot in the broadcasting studio—we can practically read the script over his shoulder—a clear indication that this is his personal story.[74] What follows is a series of scenes that illustrate multiple levels of anti-Semitism—institutional, personal, and banal—prevalent at the time.

In the next scene he enters the anteroom of the director of the government-controlled radio station. He is greeted warmly by the receptionist as the Old Doctor until she realises he is a Jew. This is followed by a confrontation between Korczak and the director. The elegant director, clearly from the Polish nobility, nervously equivocates, telling Korczak his broadcasts are to be cancelled, due to “outside pressures,” reflecting the attempt by Polish intelligentsia to appease right-wing anti-Semitic forces.

The action then moves to a summer camp for both of the orphanages. Again the



Korczak washes the children's clothes.

outside world intrudes into this idyllic setting as the coming fate of the Jews is foreshadowed. A group of older students, intelligent and active, recount everyday incidents of beatings and other violence. They want to reject Korczak's passive humanism, and take up resistance against those Poles who have attacked them. This is followed by a little cameo of the washerwoman at the camp who refuses to wash a Jewish child's dirty clothes. Korczak shames her by washing them himself.

Wajda introduces the seemingly simple story of burgeoning love between two of the teenaged orphans: a young blonde Catholic girl Ewka, and the Jewish boy, Jozek. On each of their meetings, there is a brief cut to the dark Jewish girl, Natka, who seems to anticipate Ewka's forthcoming betrayal of Jozek.

The gathering storm of persecution is symbolically evoked with an actual storm. Korczak protectively gathers the children around him, trying to raise their spirits by telling them how beautiful though frightening it is. He then "magically" disperses the thunder and lightning—illustrating his abiding but mistaken belief that he will be able to overcome the forces ranged against them.



Korczak gathers his children to shelter from the storm.



Korczak commands the storm to stop.

It can be argued that these incidents illustrate only minor forms of prejudice which pale into insignificance against the victimization experienced every day by Jews in Poland. But, in the context of the overall film, which shows the gradual isolation of the Jews and their struggle for survival in the Ghetto, they provide a distinctive account of the complexity of the relationships between Poles and Jews in this period. Anti-Semitism among Poles was not universal, nor was it simple.^[75] As with *Samson*, the depiction of the wartime years raises issues of identity—who is a Pole?—and the representation of the Jewish community.

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This discussion, using a historical framework, shows Wajda's long engagement with the issue of Polish-Jewish relations. By focusing on key moments, he traces the arc of this relationship: from the relative accord at the start of the 19th century; through the growth of the notion of a "brotherhood" in the common resistance to external forces and increasing economic interdependence; to mutual suspicion, distrust, and antipathy in the lead-up to the second World War. With cinematic means of performance, casting, shooting, editing and

mise-en-scène, these films challenge audiences to recall and try to understand how Poles and Jews lived together in the past.

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Indifference and complicity



Screen shot from *Holy Week*, showing the carousel set up outside the walls of the Warsaw Ghetto. The fun-fair was active on the eve of the ghetto uprising.

On the eve of WWII anti-Jewish propaganda in Poland diminished, at least for a while, and, once the war started, numerous instances have been reported of Poles hiding Jews at great personal risk and giving support for those incarcerated in the ghettos. On the other hand, many Poles were either indifferent to the fate of the Jewish population or they engaged in callous and criminal activities against them which also extended beyond the end of the war.^[76][\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Whether or not this was motivated by anti-Semitism, it has reinforced a conviction that has prevailed among the Jewish Diaspora, that the Polish nation as a whole rejoiced to see their country cleared of Jews.

But the Nazi project for “the complete racial reconstruction of Europe” was complex, with two distinct strands: the destruction and enslavement of the conquered Slav nations, and the removal of all Jews from German lands (Mazower 1999:164-84). For non-Jewish Poles, the leadership and intellectual elites were to be systematically obliterated such that they could not be re-constituted; and the people were to become slaves serving the needs of the Reich. The case was different for the Jews; initially they were to be transported away from the German sphere of influence, but, from 1940, that policy changed to one of complete annihilation. Bauman shows how this became a bureaucratic, industrial process, with all its grotesque gradations (Bauman 2000:117-50).

- First, there was the definition of who was a Jew and the identification of Jewish property and people with symbols;
- this was followed by the concentration of Jews into ghettos and cutting off the ghettos from the outside world;
- then came starvation, murder, and terrorism; and finally, transportation and massacre in the death camps.

He argues that, by “sealing off” the victims and targeting the persecution precisely, the Nazis could divide the population so that “the two sides [could not] easily find a common denominator and inspire an integrated, united action” (123). Hoffman agrees on the function of the ghetto, not just as a prison, but as a symbol. Jews became ever more definitively, “the other,” placed “beyond the pale of society or solidarity” (Hoffman 1999:220).

The Nazis reinforced this division by terror tactics designed to subdue the population and reduce the possibility of successful resistance. We have already seen this illustrated in Wajda’s first film *A Generation*, when Jasio is cowed into submission by the sight of Polish civilians being hung in reprisal for some act of defiance. He becomes terrified of being associated with the resistance or with his Jewish former friend Abram. Despite these extenuating circumstances, questions remain as to whether Poles could have done more to assist the Jews once the intentions of the Nazis became clear. Blonski, for example, demands that Catholic Poles not only acknowledge the failure of their historical relationship with their Jewish neighbors, but also re-examine their response to the treatment of Jews during the war and the ensuing Holocaust. It is this latter issue that Wajda addresses in particular in four films: *A Generation*, *Samson*,



A Generation: The Ghetto on fire.

Holy Week, and Korczak.

A Generation illustrates a range of behavior under the pressure of war and occupation. For example, the management of “Berg” woodworking factory where Stach is apprenticed, collaborate with the Nazis. This may have been exigent but clearly the relationship is affable and the factory is earning a fortune by constructing bunks for the occupying soldiers’ barracks. Jasio’s betrayal of Abram does not just signal a personal awakening of conscience but it is also a metonym for the wider betrayal of the Jewish population. And Wajda gives it due emphasis in an intense expressionist sequence set in Jasio’s home.

And specific evidence of Polish anti-Semitism is heaped on the shoulders of Ziarno, the workshop foreman. In a scene following a long take of the burning Ghetto where thick wreaths of smoke and forlorn flag are accompanied by a chilling lamentation of discordant piano and strings on the soundtrack. In a dissolve to the workshop, Ziarno rushes in excitedly, and, with a mocking anti-Semitic gesture, declares that “the Yids have actually started fighting.” Wajda’s montage strikingly contrasts the tragedy of the Ghetto uprising with Ziarno’s callousness.



A Generation: Ziarno’s (Zygmunt Zintel) anti-Semitic gesture.



A Generation: Sekula (Janusz Paluszkievicz) goes off to help the Jews in the Ghetto.

The demands of the censors contrasted these instances of negative behaviour with the heroic efforts of the resistance. In particular, this resulted in the foregrounding of the communist resistance movement led by the avuncular Sekula, and the demonization of the Home Army.[77] With his cell taking refuge under a bridge, Sekula appears and solemnly announces that “the ghetto rose up today ... we must help our Jewish comrades.” Then, as the music swells, he turns and gives an almost parodic farewell salute before heading off towards the distant burning ghetto.

The distortion of history imposed on Wajda seriously weakens the impact of his representation of Polish-Jewish relations at this time. Nonetheless, *A Generation* still manages to raise important questions about that relationship in a popular film which reached a wide audience in Poland and internationally.

.....

I have already discussed the opening of *Samson* with respect to the treatment of Jews in the period leading up to the war. I now want to consider some of the deeper issues raised by the main body of the film: how Samson/Jakub is represented; who helps him and other Jews, and who doesn’t; and what roles women play in his story.

After Jakub emerges from prison he and his mother are incarcerated in the ghetto by the Gestapo. His mother dies and is buried. From the graveyard,



Samson: Kasia infatuated with the sleeping Jakub

Jakub escapes over the wall with the help of an acquaintance, Genio. Jakub follows Genio to his girlfriend's place but they refuse to hide him and he is left to roam the darkened streets trying to avoid capture. By chance, he arrives at the grand apartment of Lucyna, an actress, who allows him to stay. They quickly become lovers, but he is afraid her friends will expose him and place her in danger. She reveals that she is also Jewish, but plays her role as a non-Jew successfully. He leaves anyway, and makes his way to the house of Molina, a non-Jewish former cellmate, who happily takes him in. Molina's niece, Kasia, becomes infatuated with Jakub. He is spotted by a neighbor and has to hide in Molina's cellar where he is guarded by Kasia who becomes increasingly possessive. He becomes more and more torpid until he has a vision of his mother who tells him he must be strong. Kasia cuts his hair while he is asleep and he regains his strength, breaks out, and meets up with a communist resistance group. In an act of self-sacrifice, he blows up a German patrol and dies as a building collapses on him.

Omer Bartov, while acknowledging that Wajda attempts, with *Samson*, "to confront the question of Polish attitudes toward Jews," claims he fails because he exhibits "some of the prejudices his film is intended to negate" (Bartov 2005:149). The first of his arguments concerns the representation of Jakub and his identity as a Jew as opposed to being a Pole. He claims that Jakub's Jewishness is "merely encapsulated in his victimhood—he has no other Jewish traits, links, or language" (152). Ewa Mazierska, pursuing her thesis that in Wajda's films Jews are represented as non-Jewish, rather strangely complains that Jakub does not look Jewish because he has neither sidelocks nor a beard (Mazierska 2000:215). It is true that Jakub is a secular Jew—he has no trappings of the religion; he speaks unaccented Polish (dubbed, as the French actor spoke no Polish); and he has no apparent links to the Jewish community, except for his mother. However, as Brandys emphasises in the novel and Wajda again emphasises in the film, it is his *appearance* as a Jew that is of crucial importance to his identity.

Jakub is clearly established as Jewish in the opening sequence of the film: the porter warns him the meeting is not for "your kind"; the bullies in the lecture theatre immediately see him as a Jew; and the thugs in the courtyard taunt him as a Jew. Later, after Jakub escapes from the ghetto, his appearance remains "a virtual curse" upon him (Coates 2005:163).

He has to hide his face as he wanders the streets, searching for refuge. When a Gestapo patrol nearly stumbles upon him, he is rescued by a group of "mummers" who give him a mask to hide behind. Lucyna's friends clearly know he is Jewish and when he goes into hiding in Molina's house he is soon recognized as a Jew by a woman neighbor. Jakub never denies his Jewishness, but, as he tells a vision of his mother, he "will not die just because of [his] face."

Thus, hiding, wearing a mask, and role-playing are not a rejection of Jewishness but are necessary for survival under Nazi occupation. Bartov, in a muddled argument, claims it is only when Jakub is transformed into a non-Jew that he can become an active hero (Bartov 2005:148). He goes on to say, first, that Kasia's adoration of Jakub transforms him into a Christ figure and then, when she cuts Jakub's hair, he is transformed into Samson. But it is Samson, who Bartov calls "the Jewish hero par excellence," who performs the heroic self-sacrificial action against the Germans.

Over the course of his journey to death Jakub encounters a number of Poles who help him. The first is the student who tries to stop the fascists persecuting him in the University and whom Jakub accidentally kills. The communist, Pankrat, in a neighboring cell in prison, supports him in his despair. Genio



Samson: Jakub masking his identity from the Nazis.

helps him escape the ghetto and tries to find him a hiding place in the city. Lucyna's friends welcome him to her apartment and do not seem as if they would betray him. The buskers give him a disguise when the Gestapo are about to discover him. His former cell-mate Molina takes him into his house and hides him. When Molina is accidentally killed by a bus, Kasia takes on the role of protector. Bartov's second criticism of Wajda's work is that he follows a traditional line of thought that all those who provided assistance to the Jews end up badly (Bartov 2005:150). That is, it was not only Jews who suffered at the hands of the Nazis but also Poles and that those who helped Jews were subject to tragedy. Thus, while Jews remained passive shelter-seekers, Poles were both victims and heroes. Evidence for this argument, however, is slim in *Samson*.

Furthermore, Wajda's film shows not only those who helped in one way or another but also those who denied help. Genio's girlfriend refuses him shelter, Molina's neighbors try to discover where Jakub is hidden so that they can either blackmail Molina or obtain a reward for revealing his whereabouts to the Gestapo. A street gang tries to capture him and hand him over to the Germans.



Samson: German soldiers boarding up the Ghetto.

And a more general interrogation of the lack of support for the Jews occurs in a much-quoted key scene. A long take shows German soldiers nailing in the final planks of the ghetto fence while the inmates look directly out, before they are gradually hidden. This scene directly challenges the audience—what did you do, what could you have done to stop the obliteration?

Leonard Quart is, I believe, more accurate in his assessment of *Samson* when he argues that, contrary to the official account of the time that “marginalized Jewish victimization by emphasising how Poles and other nationalities were victimized and martyred during the War,” Wajda accented the “special quality of Jewish victimization” in the figure of Jakub (2009:1-2). This “special quality” is further refined and elaborated in *Holy Week*, as we shall see.

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I have already discussed some sequences in the opening of *Korczak* showing victimization of the Polish-Jewish population in the lead up to German occupation of Warsaw in September 1939. After the defeat of the Polish army, the film jumps to late 1940 and thereafter concentrates on the personal story of Korczak, Stefa, and the children after they are forced into the ghetto. It also illustrates with great verisimilitude the fight for survival among the inmates and the continuation of life in the ghetto in all its complexity.[78]

Initially well received at the Cannes Film Festival, *Korczak* suffered a scathing attack in an emotional review by critic Danièle Heymann:

“What do we see? Germans (brutal, they must be brutal) and Jews, in collaboration. Poles—none. The Warsaw Ghetto? A matter between the Germans and the Jews. This is what a Pole is telling us.” (1990)

This, in turn, was used by Claude Lanzmann, director of the Holocaust film *Shoah*, to level accusations of anti-Semitism against Wajda and his supporters. These criticisms have been extensively dealt with elsewhere. Though they are

misdirected and problematic, they raise issues that directly concern Wajda's representation of Polish-Jewish relations.[79]

The first serious issue is that Wajda "balances" the instances we have seen of Polish ill-treatment of the Jewish population with instances where Poles try to provide support. Maryna Falska hides one of the young girls to prevent her entering the ghetto; later on, she obtains false papers for Korczak and tries to persuade him to escape; the Polish janitor from the orphanage tries to go with the children into the ghetto and is beaten by the Gestapo; and a tram-driver distributing loaves of bread to the ghetto is shot by a guard. As Insdorf remarks, "the preponderance of philo-semitic characters" in the film elicited heated criticism in the light of apparent indifference among many Poles to the plight of those in the ghetto (2003:271).[80]

Though many of these incidents occurred as Wajda portrays them, and his subsequent film, *Holy Week*, more than tips the balance the other way, this treatment lends a certain "softness" to the portrayal of Polish-Jewish relations at the time. The manifestly allegorical sub-plot of the love story between the Polish Catholic girl Ewka and Josek, one of the Jewish orphans, only compounds this failure. Even her ultimate rejection of Josek while clutching a fur coat bought cheaply, presumably from a Jewish inmate of the ghetto, cannot adequately express the bitterness felt by Jews about the lack of support from Poles.[81]

The second point raised by critics applies to the issue of representation. This is part of a more general problem that affected many film-makers who set out to reconstruct the horrors of starvation and brutalization in the ghetto in a laudable attempt to condemn the German treatment of Jews. The incorporation of footage shot by Nazi propaganda units of passive submission and despair on the one hand and gangsterism and exploitation on the other, inevitably created powerful impressions of the ghetto that became the accepted norm. They showed nothing of the schools, cultural activities, and underground organizations that tried to resist the oppression (Insdorf 2003:140).

Wajda in making *Korczak* also includes scenes that Korczak witnessed of sick, starving, and dying people; his fight with the ruling Jewish Council to give



Korczak: Ewka (Agnieszka Krukówna) clutching her fur coat.

priority to saving the children; and his continuous struggle to raise money to buy food, including a visit to the Jewish cabaret.[82] His depiction of life in the ghetto, in particular of dissolute wealthy Jews, was viciously attacked by Lanzmann who claimed that the film does nothing less than “imitate scenes shot by the Wehrmacht Propaganda Units” (Michnik 2000:172).



Korczak: Nazis filming in the Ghetto.

From a longer perspective we can see that Wajda does quite the opposite. He not only shows us propaganda cameramen at work and the sort of images they were producing, he counters these with his own—the careful organization of the orphanage; the measures taken by Korczak and Stefa to enable the children to lead a “normal” life of education and discipline; the bright and active students, especially the rebellious Shlomo; and the continual struggle against the harsh conditions imposed by the Nazis.

But perhaps the most fundamental problem raised by critics with respect to *Korczak* concerns the representation of Dr. Korczak himself. Falkowska, for example, remarks, “Wajda makes the character a doubly heroic figure: both Jewish and Polish patriot” (2007:225). Mazierska argues that in Wajda’s depiction, Korczak “not so much lives on the border between Jewishness and Polishness as crosses it to be “a good Pole”” (2000:215). Bartov goes even further to claim that for Wajda, “Korczak is Polish [that is non-Jewish] through and through” (2005:156). Is Wajda guilty, as these critics suggest, of claiming Korczak as a Polish Christian martyr, thereby over-emphasising the heroic nature of Polish support for the Jews and diminishing the power of Blonski’s questions?

Here, we must address the issue of fact versus interpretation.[83] Henryk Goldszmit (Korczak) came from a family of acculturated Jews. His grandfather was a member of the Jewish Enlightenment movement, Haskalah, that encouraged Jews to become part of the secular world. His father moved freely in the Jewish and Polish liberal intelligentsia in Warsaw but both always retained their spiritual values. Henryk himself seems to have been avowedly secular with little interest in religion of any sort. In 1919 he was conscripted into the Polish Army and fought in the Polish-Soviet war. He gave up medicine to dedicate his life to teaching, writing, and the education and support of destitute children and orphans, irrespective of faith. For his writing, Henryk chose as pen name the Polish Janusz Korczak instead of the unmistakably Jewish Goldszmit, which, Lifton speculates, allowed him to “re-create himself as an insider, linked to a heroic Polish past” (2005:section 5). As the tide of anti-Semitism rose in Poland in the 1930s he explored the possibility of migrating to Palestine to join Stefa. However, he was deeply ambivalent about such a move and vacillated until it was too late. Once the war started he turned down further opportunities to leave in order to remain with “his” children.



Korczak feeding the birds: ‘The servant said... the canary was a Jew and me a Jew as well.’

Thus Goldszmit/Korczak was a cosmopolitan figure, both Polish and Jewish. Does Wajda, then, distort the image of Korczak he produces—emphasising his Polishness more than his Jewishness? There are many assertions of his Jewishness in the film: the opening sequence and his argument with the radio station director; the sequence in the window of his study, feeding the birds, when he tells the story of his pet canary that died:

“The servant said... the canary was a Jew and me a Jew as well. He—a Pole and a Catholic would go to heaven, but as for me I would end up when I died in a place which, though not hell, was nevertheless dark” (Lifton 2005:section 2).

And the scene with Stefa in the stair-well where he recites something he had



Korczak and Stefa (Ewa Dalkowska): ‘..worst of all is to be a sick old Jew with 200 dependent children.’

written before the war when trying to get support for the orphanage:

“It’s not good to be a Jew and worse to be an old Jew and worse yet to be a sick old Jew. But the worst of all is to be a sick old Jew with 200 dependent children” (Lifton 2005: section 28)

Furthermore, he never denies his Jewishness, even when to do so would have been expedient.

There are also signs of his Polishness: not least the Polish name he assumed for his writing and broadcasting, and once in the ghetto when he refuses to take off his officer’s uniform. Bartov asserts that “he acts as a proud Pole and rejects the idea that anyone can dictate his identity” (2005:156) as if this is a negation of his Jewishness. Some critics have taken the argument further and scoured the film to find evidence that Korczak is being represented not just as a Pole but as a Christian martyr.

Mazierska, pursuing her thesis that Wajda consistently depicts “non-Jewish Jews” seems to suggest that he should not have made a film about Korczak at all:

“Wajda conveys the Polishness of Korczak much more strongly than his Jewishness. This does not result from the director’s desire to subvert the truth about the hero’s identity, but the very choice of his character ...” (Mazierska 2000:216)

Bartov, while he concedes that to have given Korczak specifically Jewish cultural traits would have been completely false, nonetheless argues:

“He is clearly presented in the film—and remembered by the Poles—as a Pole who *chose* to share the fate of the Jews in the heroic manner befitting his nation” (Bartov 2005:156)

He cites as evidence for this Christianization of the narrative of Korczak a scene in which the doctor tries to soothe the child Shlomo who feels guilt about leaving his mother to die alone. For a brief instant a ring of light appears above the boy’s head and Bartov likens the scene to a Pietà. However this scene is taken from the writings of Korczak from before the war about a similar incident:

“‘He fell asleep,’ Korczak noted. ‘It was strange, but for a brief moment I definitely saw an aura of light around his tired eight-year-old head. I had seen such a phenomenon only once before.’ And he added: ‘Even as I write this, I know that no one will understand. It is impossible unless one has been in a large orphanage dormitory in the still of night.’” (Lifton 2005:section 10)

The incident does not seem to have had any religious significance for Korczak, but did Wajda include it to sanctify him or the boy in some way or to turn him into a non-Jewish Pole? Ginsberg, in her detailed analysis of the film, agrees with those critics who claim a Christian martyr element to Wajda’s portrait of Korczak. She notes that he is made to look like Francis of Assisi; citing his appearance, dress, monastic behaviour, and the window scene feeding sparrows on the sill—‘a classic Franciscan motif’ (2007:117). Each of these aspects is arguable, especially the last since that is the scene when he recalls the first occasion he became aware of his Jewishness.

However, Ginsberg goes on to show that the film “draws out those aspects [of the orphanage] that are easily associable to Christianity” (118). Yet she concludes that the film does offer “a crucial insight into what we may call the film’s allegorical elegy to a Polish national history that is contemporaneous with



Korczak at night in the dormitory.

Eastern Jewish development ..” (119). Thus, in the end, she seems to accept that the film is a continuation of Wajda’s examination of Polish-Jewish relations, while noting that some, especially Zionists, choose not to acknowledge “this crucial insight.”

If Korczak is not strongly represented as a Jew neither is he strongly represented as a Christian. If anything, he is overdetermined in the film as a cosmopolitan Jewish-Pole.[84] Thus, Wajda insists on his audience acknowledging what could be said to embody the “brotherhood of nations.”

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Images from *Holy Week*:



Jan trapped in a moral dilemma.



Irena staring at events in the Ghetto.



Jerzy Andrzejewski's short novel *Holy Week* is a near contemporaneous account, from outside the Warsaw ghetto walls, of the start of the uprising during Easter week in 1943.[85][[open endnotes in new window](#)] Its central protagonists are Irena Lilien, an elegant young woman from a wealthy family of assimilated Jews, part of the Polish intelligentsia, and her former Polish lover Jan Malecki.[86] The two have not met for some time and Jan is now married to Anna, a devout Catholic, who is pregnant with his child. As the Germans begin in earnest to round up and murder all Jews in Poland, including her parents, Irena escapes capture and is forced into hiding, moving from place to place. In the week before Easter, she arrives destitute and desperate in Warsaw just as the ghetto uprising begins. Jan encounters her by chance close by the ghetto walls and, somewhat uncertainly, offers her shelter in his family apartment in a nearby suburb of the city. Still not safe, she is attacked by a neighbor Piotrowski, intent on rape, and then betrayed by his malicious and jealous wife. Forced to leave the building, she curses the neighbors and heads for her tragic fate. Meanwhile, Jan is killed by Polish fascists while trying to obtain new identity papers for Irena so that she can move on to another hiding place. Anna is left to mourn.

The novel is a caustic indictment of the attitude of many Poles towards the annihilation of the Jews in the Warsaw ghetto. As Jan Gross remarks, it dramatizes "the abandonment of the Jews to Nazi persecution by the dominant Polish society" (Andrzejewski 2007:ix). Andrzejewski details the relentless persecution by bounty hunters, informers, and extortionists that forced the Liliens to flee their home. Trying to find shelter, they are betrayed again and again until at last Irena's father in despair joins a band of fellow Jews going to their deaths. The novel describes the response of the majority of Warsaw residents to the ghetto uprising that ranges through indifference and lack of pity, voyeurism, racism, to positive glee. Children chase a Jewish child who has escaped from the ghetto until a German soldier shoots him. There are outbursts of anti-Semitic venom from the fascist Zalewski and the poisonous Mrs. Piotrowski. A holiday atmosphere prevails with the approach of the Easter celebrations, and people go about their ordinary lives as if no tragedy were occurring behind the wall.

These instances are only partially offset by accounts of Polish suffering: the death of most of Anna's family at the hands of the Germans; their neighbor, Mrs Karski, whose husband and son die in the resistance; other Polish families who are killed for harboring Jews; and the vast graveyard Anna visits that commemorates Polish soldiers killed in the fight against Germany. Support for the Jews is muted: Jan equivocates, reluctant to become involved, reluctant to take any action that might cause him trouble; Marta, a clerk in Jan's office, stands up against Zalewski, but can only resign her job; Anna piously wishes Catholics would offer help but offers merely moral support. Active help is focused on Jan's brother, Julek, and a small number of other youngsters who smuggle arms to the ghetto fighters. Yet, as Andrzejewski notes, this was just a "demonstration of support" rather than a concerted attempt to offset the overwhelming force ranged against them (Andrzejewski 2007:68).[87]

The novel's attempt "to confront the moral void which appeared in the collective mind of Poles" at the end of the war (Sobolewski 1995) attracted Wajda in his



A burning window in the Ghetto. A man jumps to his death. A child shot by a sniper. Children fall to their deaths trying to escape.



continuing quest to provoke an examination of Polish-Jewish relations. He made a number of attempts to adapt it for cinema all of which were stifled by the communist regime (Haltorf 2011:202), (Coates 2000b:27-8). He was finally able to film *Holy Week* in 1996 as a co-production for Polish television and Heritage Productions.[88]

The screenplay retains the overall balance of the novel. Wajda omits some instances of Polish suffering at the hands of the Gestapo whilst highlighting the Jewish tragedy. He also retains most of the examples of support for the Jews and virtually all those of Polish complicity with or indifference to their fate. A detailed comparison of the novel and film does not really bear out Oscar Swan's assertion that Wajda sanitized the screenplay for easier domestic consumption (Andrzejewski 2007:135-8). However, Wajda changes the focus of the film from Jan Malecki's agonizing over his moral dilemma to Irena's alienation and exclusion from the Polish nation to which she once felt she belonged.

Jan's internal conflict is strongly expressed in the novel—his response to the Jewish tragedy was “dark, complex, and deeply disturbing,” “... his feelings of complicity became exceptionally strongly aroused,” however, “there was within him more unease and terror than actual love...” (14). His renewed encounter with Irena forces him to confront this conflict and confusion at a more direct and personal level.

Wajda encapsulates Jan's dilemma in a single instance—a held image following a difficult series of encounters at his workplace. The fascist Zalewski has just spouted extreme anti-Semitic views and tries to elicit Jan's support. He equivocates and is scornfully told off by Marta who denounces Zalewski. And then Jan denies Irena, pretending to his boss that he knows nothing of her whereabouts.

Wajda inserts the recurring snippet of armed and masked motorcyclists riding past to the accompaniment of doom-laden muffled drums. Perhaps they are part of the *Einsatzgruppen*, the motorized death squads, looking for Jewish victims. They are not seen from Jan's point-of-view but they seem to express his fear as, morally trapped, he stares out of imprisoning window bars.

But Irena is the core of the film. In the first four scenes, before she meets Jan, we see her watch her father, from a hiding place in the woods, join a band of fellow Jews being herded to their death. Somehow escaping, she is forced by leering extortionists to hand over her last gold coin, hidden in her underwear, to avoid the Gestapo. Half dressed and humiliated, she runs off and arrives by tram in the city.

And here we see her staring, transfixed by the ghetto wall. A restless, moving camera captures the jagged events as if from her point-of-view: the burning buildings, people jumping to their deaths, a child shot in a window, children jumping or falling. But, her stillness, deliberately set against the constant camera movement, positions her as the focus of these events. She is the victim with whom we are asked to identify, personifying the community hidden behind the walls.

Some while later, in the Maleckis' apartment, we come to the key scene that expresses Irena's state of mind. She is volatile and emotional: first helpless—What am I supposed to do? Then she becomes accusatory and defiant as Jan asks what happened—“The same thing as always”—and she describes the extortionists we have seen earlier. Jan offers to fetch clothes from her previous refuge and she looks at him intently, fearful. Edgy strings describe her state:

“...when I meet someone new now, I look into their eyes and wonder whether they'd be able to turn me in. How can I live like this? I'll

Irena on the roof sees the Ghetto in flames.

never be a normal human being.”

She collapses in tears on his shoulder—Jan is uncomfortable but tries to reassure her saying everything will be different after the war. And now Irena becomes cynical and bitter as she snaps out the truth:

“People won't be different. Except then they won't have the right to kill me. But they'll still regret not being able to make five rubles off me. You'll see how it'll be. We'll be even more despised when we get our rights back and can return to our homes and feel free to walk down the street. Now only shame keeps people from siding against us. People help us out of a sense of obligation, but then they won't have to.”

Wajda compresses the dialogue from the novel and his scenario specifically highlights Irena's instability.

Given the events in Poland after the war when a number of shameful attacks took place on Jews returning from the camps or from forced exile in Russia, this scene showed remarkable foresight. Of course, we do not know how Andrzejewski changed the novel as a result of such events, but certainly Wajda would have been aware of the impact of these words on his audience. Subsequent stark images show Irena's descent into a kind of madness, interspersed with her attempts to lead a life of some normality.

The Gestapo arrive at the Malecki's apartment block and Irena is hidden in the attic. She crawls onto the roof where she stares in horror and disbelief at the burning ghetto. Wajda intensifies the emotion by a shimmer of fear from over-stretched violin strings

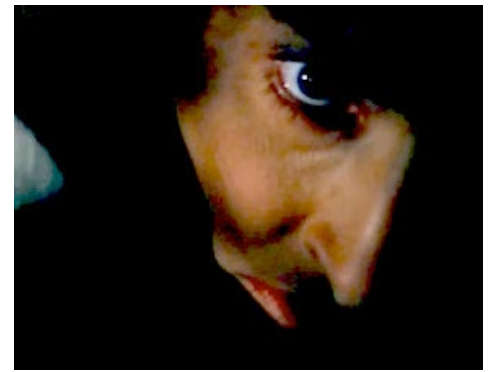
The next evening when Jan and Anna are in bed, the sound of gunfire reaches them from the ghetto. Screeching strings represent the sound of screaming. Irena is discovered in a corner, terrified, hands covering her ears.

The next day, as Julek and his fellows suicidally break into the ghetto to supply arms, Wajda intercuts Anna crying as she knows what is happening with Irena in the dark smoking his tobacco. Irena is illuminated in an unsettling profile.

Later, Wajda interposes scenes of the burning ghetto and the *Einsatzgruppen* with a piece of burning paper silently floating in the air. It drifts across the screen, and we see Irena in the background, behind the flame, staring, transfixed as she sees herself “consumed” by the fire.

This is followed immediately by Irena in bed, one enormous eye, staring into darkness before the final day.





Irena cowers from the sound of screams in the Ghetto, waits in the dark, sees a burning paper from the Ghetto float into the room, and foresees her fate.



Irena walks towards the burning Ghetto.



Anna (Magdalena Warzecha) kisses the statue of Christ.

This series of striking, painterly images links us, through Irena, to the anonymous, hidden occupants of the ghetto, and we follow her as she is drawn inexorably to the fate of her fellow Jews. Finally, after Piotrowski's attempted rape and his wife's denunciation of Irena, Irena venomously curses them all and returns to the city where she disappears into the smoke and flames to her certain death.

In her critique of the novel Joanna Rostropowicz Clark describes the transformation of Irena from "a free-spirited and cosmopolitan, charming member of the privileged class of assimilated Polish Jews" as typical of the extremity of the situation. In such situations, she argues, "People tend to shed their particularity and behave as members of their primary community" (2007:1)—people are moved to the extremes by adversity. In the film Irena is already at the extreme having experienced the loss of her father, blackmail, and extortion, and, her fear at the sights and sounds of the ghetto. But she is not, as Bartov claims, "a passive shelter-seeker" (2005:152). Rather she is bitter, aggressive and, ultimately, vengeful—the fragile relationship of "human brotherhood" between Pole and Jew irrevocably fractured.

If Wajda brings to the foreground the desperate situation of Jews in Poland by focusing on Irena, his treatment of Anna somewhat dilutes this message. She is the still, calm centre of the household—the archetypical Polish Catholic Mother embodying a specific patriotic connotation (Oleksi 2000:117). While Jan and Julek go to their ultimately pointless deaths, Anna carries her child—a symbolic representation of the eternal regeneration of the nation. She is tolerant of Irena, and would help her if she could, but Irena remains an outsider—not a Pole. Despite this further example of the imbalance in Wajda's treatment of women, *Holy Week* nonetheless powerfully exposes the rupture of relations between Catholics and Jews in Poland which persists into the 21st century.

.....

The final film to be discussed in this paper, *Landscape After Battle* (1970), is an amalgam of incidents taken from some of the short stories by Tadeusz Borowski—in particular "The Battle of Grunwald." [89] These stories are set in the immediate aftermath of the defeat of the Nazis and concern the effects of liberation on the occupants of a concentration camp and subsequently a Displaced Persons (DP) camp in Germany.

Wajda's representations of rejection and inhumanity contain threads from Borowski's stories, illustrating how "ordinary people" were induced to act in the way they did, how the extreme conditions of war made almost any behavior possible. This behavior could be applied to the wider community in Poland during the war. As people's humanity is stripped away—as it was for the Jews in Poland—they become potential objects of victimization.

Images from *Landscape After Battle*:



Tadeusz (Daniel Olbrychski) rescues books from the camp.

A major strand of the film, though, is the effect the war has had on Tadeusz, a Polish intellectual and long-time resident of the camp, and Nina, a Jewish refugee from Poland. In Wajda's adaptation, Tadeusz is unable to accept his freedom—he is institutionalized, happiest in a cell away from his fellows, reading the books he has greedily gathered from the debris of the camp. We see camp life through his eyes—the chaos, the never-satisfied hunger for food and sex, the vengeance towards Germans in general. But we also see his contempt for the Catholic church—the way the priests shut their eyes to the brutality of the released prisoners—and the myths of Polishness reveling in past glories. Tadeusz cannot sing the patriotic songs belted out by the former Polish soldiers; he watches their ragged marching—avoiding puddles in the courtyard; and he sees the re-enactment of the historical battle of Grunwald dissolve into farce. [90] Tadeusz, it seems, cannot accept the post-war Poland as a place to which he wishes to return.

With the arrival of Nina at the DP camp, Tadeusz is forced to re-evaluate his position. She leads him out of the monochromatic, bleak camp, across mounds of dirt, into sunlit, colorful autumn woods where they uncertainly make love before Tadeusz insists they return to camp. It is during this pastoral interlude that Wajda once again explores the issues of national identity, the Polish-Jewish relationship, and its prospects following the Holocaust.



Nina (Stanislawa Celinska) leads Tadeusz out of the desolate camp...



... into the autumnal countryside, where they make love.

Nina, who according to Tadeusz, looks Aryan, escaped persecution in Poland during the war by pretending to be a Catholic Pole. For six years she went to Mass every Sunday, and was in love with—maybe lived with—a Pole. But she carries with her everywhere a missal given her by her mother, which contains the tablets of Moses in Hebrew.[91] At the end of the war she confesses in a letter to her lover that she is Jewish and leaves Poland before he can reply.



Nina takes mass...

In the debate between Nina and Tadeusz, she rejects the idea of a Jewish identity being forced on her—she wants neither to be a Jew nor a Pole—she says she “thought there were still other people,” and she wants to escape being confined by race and by a notional “homeland” (Coates 2005:140). Tadeusz on the other hand will “always think and feel in Polish” ... “everything that made me what I am is Polish.” He suddenly begins to identify with the homeland, traditions, language, community and history of Poland. It is as if Nina, by her rejection of identity, has made him more aware of his own identity, of the meaning of home—the Jewish absence confirms the meaning of Polishness. Thus, again, as in Irena's speech in *Holy Week*, Wajda has a Jew acknowledging and asserting that there is no place for her in post-war Poland.

A major criticism of this work is that it focuses on the deprivation and suffering of the Pole, Tadeusz. His trauma, his obsessive behavior, his uncertainty about his identity, his bitterness towards Germans, obscures the suffering of the Jews



...but wears a missal containing 'the tablets of Moses which is supposed to link me with the Jews.'

such as Nina (Coates 2005:112). While this is true, Wajda's anger at the treatment in 1968 of the remaining Jews in Poland spills over into his indictment in this film of Polish nationalism and the lack of room it gives to other sections of society.

The legacy

The relation between Jews and Poles is a treacherous subject, not least because of the continuing sensitivities of both parties. Divisions persist between the Jewish and Polish communities, as exemplified by conflicts over the Jewish and Christian memorials at Auschwitz; the furore over the publication of *Neighbors* (Gross 2001) an account that indicts Poles for the massacre of Jews at Jedwabne; and responses to that publication (Polonsky and Michlic 2009).[92] Extreme Polish nationalists periodically deface Jewish memorials, demonstrating that anti-Semitism persists even where there is no obvious target.[93] Many Jews continue to label all Poles as anti-Semitic, and Polish reaction continues to be defensive. As Salmonowicz notes of the relationship between Poles and Jews:

"It is a subject so full of all sorts of taboos, so packed with distortions and at the same time full of all sorts of emotions, true, false, or fabricated, that any lucid pronouncement is unpopular ... in both camps" (Salmonowicz 1997:53).

It seems there will always be people prepared to listen to myths, and racists prepared to foment hatred, just as there will always be those who hide from unpalatable truths and retreat into silence. Jan Blonski was perhaps the first to point the way towards reconciliation by confronting the terrible events that took place in Poland and calling for an honest reappraisal.

The representation of Polish-Jewish relations—sometimes peripherally, sometimes centrally—has been an essential element of Wajda's engagement with Polish national identity. As Michael Stevenson remarks, this theme is "a gnawing undercurrent filled with an anxious and uneasy doubt" throughout his work (2003:84).

In the first part of this paper, I have shown how Wajda traces the trajectory of the Polish-Jewish relationship at critical points in Poland's history. In *Pan Tadeusz*, set in 1812, the Jewish segment of the population, though not integrated or assimilated, is clearly an important part of Polish life. Through the 19th century, a period of rapid industrial growth and widespread assimilation movements, the idea of a brotherhood of nations flourished. *Land of Promise*, set in the latter part of the century, demonstrates the edgy nature of that brotherhood and its eventual failure amid growing tensions between the different communities. *The Wedding*, set at the turn of the century, exposes the growing unease in the relationship—"friends who do not like each other much." And the pre-war sections of *Samson* and *Korczak* illustrate the rising tide of anti-Semitism that marks the final failure of the brotherhood. Though obviously not directly addressing Blonski's first question—"how did you live together in the past?"—Wajda has nonetheless pursued that issue in this series of films.

Blonski's other questions concern the way Poles responded to the onslaught of Nazism. In the second part of this paper I have argued that Wajda pursues this issue very directly, though often constrained by the regime under which his films were produced. His first film, *A Generation*, despite the fact that it distorts history, balances complicity with support for the Jews. *Korczak*, while largely

set inside the Warsaw ghetto and therefore separated from the outside world, does ask how it could have happened that a secular, much loved figure in Poland and his orphans be imprisoned and slaughtered with little in the way of objection. *Samson* and *Holy Week* are very powerful portraits of the exploitation of Jews and their rejection by fellow citizens. Finally, *Landscape After Battle* reveals how Polish nationalism leaves no place for Jews in post-war Poland. Wajda's representation of Polish anti-Semitism and acts of acquiescence with the de-humanization of the Jews, urges Poles to understand that while of course they were not to blame for the Holocaust, they nonetheless have a moral responsibility for failing to see the Jews as an essential part of the Polish people.

Yet, a critical examination of Wajda's films reveals serious difficulties, some of which have already been discussed in this paper. Though Wajda is not alone in his apparent reticence about explicitly illustrating the worst of the persecution of Jews by Poles, it is true that there is little in his work to compare with such damning documentaries as those of Lanzmann (*Shoah*, 1985), and Marzyski (*Small Town in Poland* or *Shtetl*, 1996), or the descriptions of the post-war Kielce massacre, or the events described in Jan Gross's history of the Jedwabne massacre, or even in the recent feature film, *Ida* (2013), by Pawel Pawlikowski. Yet this reticence does not justify the accusations of anti-Semitism made against Wajda, most prominently by Lanzmann and the French critic Danièle Heymann,[94] which cannot stand up to close examination of the film texts. The absurdity of these attacks has been pointed out by, among others, such critics as Adam Michnik (1996a:16) and Paul Coates, even though the latter disapproved of the insensitivity in *Promised Land*.

Nonetheless, the lacunae in Wajda's work need an explanation beyond the purely instrumental one that Polish films about Poles acting brutally would have been poorly received in Poland. I would argue that Wajda attempts something different, and perhaps more difficult, than a re-presentation of the horrors of the war in Poland. He tries to show the more subtle effects of dehumanization and of people driven to extremes of behavior by fear and deprivation.

The political distortions that mar some of Wajda's films have already been discussed. That these occurred under duress is not disputed. However for a contemporary viewer they weaken his position as a transmitter of historical events and attitudes. This analysis of his films, though, has shown that like many artists working under totalitarian regimes, censorship can be by-passed to a certain extent by allegory and the deployment of images in a way that defies suppression. Wajda's battles against the constraints of his times are well documented and attest to the sincerity of his project.

Michael Stevenson most accurately and succinctly sums up his achievement when he describes Wajda's

“prolonged engagement with the centuries-old Polish-Jewish relationship and also with the finalities of the Holocaust. This narrative process across many texts is by no means certain and secure. It wavers; it trembles with uncertainty and anxiety, yet with passion in its moral commitments” (Stevenson 2003:87).

There is uncertainty in Wajda's work. In particular it is difficult to dismiss the charge that he was guilty of stereotyping, and there is evidence of an unconscious set of attitudes about identity that creep into his work—perhaps most particularly in *Promised Land*. It is also clear that Wajda strove against this tendency and tried to correct it where possible. However, I would agree with Ostrowska in her analysis of the distinct treatment of Polish Catholic and Jewish women in his films (2000). Not only do we have the pure blondes of Ewka, Anka, the Bride in *The Wedding*, and Anna, contrasted with the dark

sensuality of their Jewish counterparts, in addition we have Anna—and potentially Anka and the Bride—as the preserver of the Polish nation set against the disruptive power of the Jewish woman. Jewish Otherness is quite clearly “doubled” by these representations.

Finally, there is the criticism that Wajda shows a greater concern with Polish identity than with the position of Jews in Poland. There is some evidence for this though I have argued against Bartov’s specific claim that Wajda’s Jewish heroes are Christianized and Mazierska’s that his Jews are non-Jewish. Rather, I maintain that Wajda has explicitly voiced the charge that, even those Jews who have fully assimilated cannot be fully accepted as part of the Polish nation. Through his work we can see that a multicultural, polyglot society has chosen to become an ethnic and religious monolith.

I have discussed how, in over 50 years of filmmaking, Wajda pursued his project to expose and condemn anti-Semitism, to reveal the insidious way Jews were placed outside Polish society, and to show how some Poles acquiesced or were complicit with active persecution of the Jews. Though not always successful in achieving his aim to provoke the conscience of his fellow citizens—and of all of us—his efforts deserve widespread recognition.

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Notes

1. In the nineteenth century, according to Davies, “the lands of partitioned Poland ... contained four-fifths of world Jewry” (2005:176). By 1930, even after the mass migration of Jews to the USA, the world Jewish population was estimated to be 12-13 million of which about 3.5 million lived in Poland and a further 2.7 million in neighboring lands (that is, about 50% of the world’s total).
2. For a summary of the three partitions leading to the dissolution of Poland see the Wikipedia article at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Partitions_of_Poland.
3. Assimilation was usually an individual choice though there were some assimilationist mass movements, such as the Frankists in the 1760s (Davies 2005:181).
4. For example, Cherry refers to the Jewish “elder” brother and the Christian “younger” brother in a common faith (Cherry and Orla-Bukowska 2007:xi).
5. See, for example, Mendelsohn (2002) on Jewish and Polish art, Cizmiec (2011) and Trochimczyk (2007) on music, Wisse (2003), Steinlauf (1989) on theatre, and Segel (1996) on poetry and literature.
6. See, in particular, Baron (2007), Bartov (2005), Coates (2000a, 2000b, 2003, 2005), Falkowska (2007), Haltof (2002, 2007, 2011), Mazierska (2000), Ostrowska (2000), and Stevenson (2003).
7. Though the Republic was founded in 1918, it was not until 1921 that its boundaries were settled. See Davies (2001:100-106).
8. More than 25,000 Polish prisoners of war were executed at Katyn in 1940 in a deliberate policy, authorized by Stalin, to eliminate much of the Polish military and intelligentsia. The Russians only belatedly acknowledged this event in 1990 (Davies 2001:422). Until then, Wajda believed the Germans had killed his father.
9. See Wajda’s official website (Lezenska 2000–2011), and the extensive recorded interviews at <http://www.webofstories.com/play/13542> [accessed March 2014].
10. The films concern the Polish resistance movements (communists and the Home Army) first at the time of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, then during the

general Warsaw uprising, and finally at the end of the war.

11. For useful insights into the influence of Wajda's films in Poland see Falkowska (2007), Stevenson (2003), and Mazierska (2000).

12; See, for example, Fabian Schuppert for a description of state control of Polish cinema (2006) and John Bates' wider discussion of censorship (2001)

13. Despite acknowledging the conditions under which his films had to be produced, Mazierska, rather unjustly, accuses Wajda of opportunism, of attempting always to "please his audiences" at the expense of truth and avoiding anything that would "seriously offend... anyone" (2000:225). Clearly Wajda was forced to compromise in some respects but his commitment to an examination of Polish identity and the Polish-Jewish relationship is not in doubt (see also Haltof (2011:87).

14. The film is set in the Austrian-controlled zone of Poland, which at this time was partitioned into three areas occupied by Austria, Prussia, and Russia.

15. *Man of Marble* seems to anticipate the workers' movement that led to the formation of the Solidarity Trade Union that is the subject of *Man of Iron*, and which was critical to the ending of communist rule in Poland. Wajda has since made a third film, *Man of Hope* (2013), which tells the story of Lech Walesa, leader of the Solidarity movement who became the first President of the Polish Republic.

16. In his interviews Wajda quotes French poet Alfred de Musset (1810-57) —"Poles, if there is nothing you can do to stop them from swallowing you, and you have been swallowed already, then do everything to stop them from digesting you." See

<http://www.webofstories.com/play/13542> [accessed Aug 2013]

17. *Shoah* is a painstakingly made documentary commissioned to reflect on the Holocaust from the Jewish perspective. It materialized as an indictment of Polish complicity in the murder of Jews and caused much controversy in Poland and the United States both for its methods and its partial account—see, for example Cherry (2007:35-37).

18. While Wajda's films caused storms of criticism among Jews, Lanzmann's film caused an equal storm among Poles. But, as Polonsky notes, the results of the uproar were not entirely negative as it opened up the subsequent dialogue (2007:124-26). See also Zborowski's brief foreword on the contemporary relevance of this dialogue (2007:x).

19. These notes draw principally on the work of Norman Davies (2001), Eva Hoffman (1999), Mark Mazower (1999), Misha Glenny (1993), and Neal Ascherson (1987).

20. In the period 1500-1650 the Commonwealth was remarkably diverse both ethnically and in religious practice (Steinlauf 1997:5).

21. Jewish presence in Poland was welcomed, at least by the monarchy and

nobility, because of the benefits that Jewish artisans and traders brought in terms of economic development (Hoffman 1999:80-84). Though the welcome was not uniform—there was considerable resentment amongst the peasant population at what they perceived as the unfair privileges accorded to many Jews, and there was visible economic disparity—the conditions at this time were so favorable that it is estimated the Commonwealth was home to about three-quarters of the world's Jewry.

22. In Prussia, Jews migrated to the cities in great numbers and became increasingly “Westernized”; the position in Austria was more mixed between urban success and rural poverty; and in Russia, the Jews were confined to the Pale of Settlement and subject to ever-increasing restrictions, expulsions and pogroms.

23. The assassination of the Russian Tsar in 1881 caused riots in Warsaw as the result of rumors of Jewish responsibility. In addition, pogroms in the Pale caused a destabilising influx of Jews to the Austrian controlled partition (Davies 2005:182-84).

24. Pilsudski was Head of State and then Prime Minister of the Second Polish Republic (between 1918-35).

25. Dmowski was a right-wing nationalist ideologue with significant influence in Poland between the wars. He openly espoused strong anti-Semitic views.

26. Jews were regarded as a “race” under the Nazi classification rules. [[return to page 2](#)]

27. It is estimated there were over 18 million non-combatant victims of Nazi Germany, of which 11 million were killed in Poland. Between five and six million European Jews were killed, almost half of the total estimated in 1941. Over six million Polish citizens were killed including almost the entire Jewish population of about three million. See, for example, Mazower (1999:173-75).

28. After the war, some 300,000 Jews returned to Poland from territory ceded to the USSR causing serious conflict with Poles. In one notorious incident in 1946, forty-two Jews were massacred in the town of Kielce. Subsequently, other incidents of this type led to a wave of emigration. The reinstatement of Gomulka to the leadership in 1956 and the anti-Semitic campaign by General Moczar in the 1960s to cleanse public life of “alien elements” resulted in the purging of Jews from the communist party and caused most of the remaining Jews to leave (Davies 2001:323).

29. From a speech made by Rafael Scharf at a conference in Oxford in 1984 - see Polonsky (1990:196). This segment is quoted in Blonski (1990:45).

30. See, for example, Onecki (1987:12-23, 51-53, and 114-116), Mazower (1999:164-69), and Goska (2001).

31. For a reasonably balanced view of the arguments see Sinnreich (2007).

32. The article was originally published in a Catholic weekly journal,

33. This appears in the poem, “A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto”, written by Czeslaw Milosz in Warsaw, at the time of the Ghetto Uprising in 1943. His own translation is reproduced in Polonsky (1990:51).

34. The sequence can be seen on YouTube at:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detail_page&list=ULdV2bkYiWdtQ&v=dV2bkYiWdtQ#t=400s

35. The poem “Campo di Fiori” (1943) by Milosz refers to the carousel erected by the Germans directly next to the walls of the Warsaw Ghetto. He notes how the “vivacious music” of the merry-go-round drowns out the sound of gunfire and explosions from the Ghetto and how:

“Sometimes the wind from burning houses
would bring the kites along,
and people on the merry-go-round
caught the flying charred bits.”
(also reproduced in Blonski (1990:49-50)).

36. The sequence can be seen on YouTube at:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detail_page&list=ULdV2bkYiWdtQ&v=dV2bkYiWdtQ#t=240s

37. The sequence can be seen on YouTube at:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TSjNrGNomfM&feature=relmfu&list=ULdV2bkYiWdtQ&v=dV2bkYiWdtQ#t=393s>

38. See, for example, Michalek (1973) and Mazierska (2005).

39. See Haltof (2011:81, n10).

40. Mickiewicz, often compared to Byron and Goethe in the pantheon of Romantic poets, was active in the movement for Polish independence. He was exiled to Russia in 1824 at the age of 26 and five years later was permitted to travel abroad. He travelled through Germany and Italy before settling in France. He died of cholera, contracted in the Crimea, at the age of 56. For a brief description of the genesis of *Pan Tadeusz* see Di Bartolomeo (2003:172-76).

41. All quotations from the poem are taken from the translation by Kenneth R. Mackenzie.

42. According to Falkowska, Wajda was meticulous in his preparation and research before making the film. He consulted critics and audiences alike to ensure his screenplay adhered to the spirit of the original (2007:249-52).

43. The film was an instant success with audiences in Poland and continues to be viewed frequently on DVD and on YouTube where it has had over 120,000 views in the last 12 months (as of January 2014).

44. See, for example Di Bartolomeo (2003) or Mazierska for her dismissive

review of the film as merely a “heritage” piece (2001).

45. Jankiel’s playing slides into a polonaise composed by Wojciech Kilar for the film. This became an instant hit in Poland. The sequence can be seen on YouTube at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vq-VmzcJa3Y>

46. Reymont went on to become the first Polish winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature for his 1924 novel *Chłopi* (*The Peasants*).

47. The population of Lodz, a small town near Warsaw, grew from a base of less than 1000 in 1820, to over 300,000 by 1890 (Young and Kaczmarek 2008:58).

48. Lodz became known for labor troubles, culminating in a general strike in 1892 (Young and Kaczmarek 2008:58).

49. Further turmoil resulted from the migration of considerable numbers of Jews from the Russian area of the Pale (known as the *Litvak* invasion) who brought with them Marxist and Communist ideologies (Davies 2005:184).

50. Edward Gierek came to power in 1970.

51. For Wajda’s account of the making of *The Promised Land* see the interviews at

<http://www.webofstories.com/play/13662?o=MS> and related videos.

52. See Nurczynska-Fidelska (2003) for a comparison of elements of the novel with the film, and Falkowska for a discussion of some analyses of both forms (2007:148-50).

53. *Promised Land* received an Oscar nomination for Best Foreign Film in 1976 and Wajda had high hopes for a successful distribution in America for what he called his “most American film.” However, Danièle Heymann, a reviewer in *Le Monde* labelled the film anti-Semitic and as a result distribution in the US (and some other countries) was blocked—see (Michalek and Turaj 1988:154). Wajda was extremely bitter about this criticism—see, for example, the interview at

<http://www.webofstories.com/play/13665?o=MS>

54. The sequence, without subtitles, can be seen on YouTube at

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C5NAAAWd4d4&list=UU4ref85k2b9HLOrUigh5vQQ&index=42&feature=relmfu?feature=player_detailpage&list=ULdV2bkYiWdtQ&v=dV2bkYiWdtQ#t=628s

55. The sequence, without subtitles, can be seen on YouTube at

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=08KqVfwvtIw&feature=relmfu?feature=player_detailpage&list=ULdV2bkYiWdtQ&v=dV2bkYiWdtQ#t=110s

[[return to page 3](#)]

56. This is the version generally available on DVD.

57. References to the original text are based on the translation by Noel Clark (Wyspianski 1998).

58. One of the penalties of adapting a literary classic is that it becomes subject to close textual comparison (Falkowska 2007:140-41).

59. Falkowska suggests the film is “virtually inexplicable” to audiences whose knowledge of Polish history is limited (2007:135), and even Adam Michnik finds obscure a number of the allusions to the past (2000:152).

60. Wajda inserts a sequence behind the credits that follows the guests from the wedding in the town to the farmhouse.

61. The strawmen, or *chochol*, are rose bushes covered in straw to protect them against frost.

62. Coates notes that this theme, that sounds like a Jew’s harp, implies a link between Jewishness and the ghostly exterior (1992:132).

63. In a couple of places the innkeeper is referred to as Moishe or Moses, but this seems to be a generic reference. In the poem he is simply called the Jew.

64. Stage directions call for the icon to depict Our Lady of Czestochowa, one of the most revered Catholic symbols (Wyspianski 1998).

65. According to Vinecour, not just the *Endecja* was committed to anti-Semitism, but “Every Polish political party with the exception of the Socialists” (Vinecour and Fishman 1977:5). For a more detailed discussion of this period and the ideological and political battles between Pilsudski, who provided some support for the Jews, and Roman Dmowski, leader of the strongly nationalist and anti-Semitic movement, see Davies (2001:113-128).

66. Hoffman notes that, on the eve of World War II, Jewish entrepreneurs controlled many major industries; Jewish firms employed more than 40% of the Polish labor force; and Jews were seen as disproportionately represented in the professions (1999:88-89).

67. For a summary of Brandys’ life and works, see (Adamczyk-Garbowska 2003: 181-83)

68. Much has been made of the casting of French actor Serge Merlin as Jakub. For example, both Quart and Haltof argue unconvincingly that the choice of a “scrawny” or “slender” intellectual as opposed to a powerful, physical actor changes the nature of the character and the film (Haltof 2011:87) and (Quart 2009). Coates is more perceptive, noting that by reducing the emphasis on physical strength, the casting positions the film as an allegorical rendering of “human isolation” (2005:163).

69. See, for example Eva Hoffman (2011).

70. Stefa was enormously important to the work of the orphanage. For more details of her life and work see Lifton (2005).

71. See Coates (2005:96-99) and Haltof (2011:189-91) for a discussion of the previous attempts at this project.

72. Ford went on to make his version of the film, *Dr Korczak, the Martyr*, an Israeli-West German co-production, released in 1974. This was a failure both critically and commercially, and apparently was criticized for largely suppressing Dr Korczak's Jewish roots (Haltof 2011:191).

73. Holland had been living in exile in France since the establishment of martial law in 1981. Unable to make her own films, she worked with Wajda on *Danton* (1983) and he offered her the chance to write the screenplay for *Korczak*. See <http://www.webofstories.com/play/13710?o=MS> (accessed March 2014).

74. Holland used the diaries kept by Dr. Korczak in the Ghetto as the basis for much of the screenplay (Haltof 2011:192).

75. See, for example the discussion in Polonsky (1990:19-21).

76. There are many accounts of both positive and negative Polish behavior during the war: see for example Bartoszewski (1988), Goska (2001), Onecki (1987), Sliwinski (1997), and Joseph Kermish's introduction in Ringelblum (1976). [[return to page 4](#)]

77. Ziarno is a member of the Home Army hated by the communist censors. See Haltof (2011:28).

78. Wajda's picture of the ghetto is faithful to accounts of eyewitnesses. See, for example, Ainsztein (1979:16-17) and Zuckerman (1993).

79 See, for example, Colombat (1993:113-16), Michnik (2000:170-73), Haltof (2011:195-99), Ginsberg (2007), Insdorf (2003:271-72), and Baron (2007:44-48).

80. Claude Lanzmann was particularly incensed by this imbalance in the film, see Michnik (2000:171-72).

81. In the winter of 1941 the Jews were ordered to turn over to the Nazis via the Judenrat all the furs they possessed (Lifton 2005:section 32).

82. Wajda's picture of the way the Jewish Council were led into the process of trying to save what they could from the ghetto is accurate and sympathetic—see Bauman (2000:129-42). The other events are much as described by Lifton (2005).

83. These notes rely extensively on the excellently researched biography of Henryk Goldszmit alias Janusz Korczak by Betty Jean Lifton (2005).

84. As Lifton remarks: "Perhaps because Korczak was determined to live as both a Pole and a Jew in prewar Poland, he was not above criticism in his lifetime: many Jews saw him as a renegade who wrote in Polish rather than Yiddish or Hebrew, while no amount of acculturation could make the right-

wing Poles forget that he was a Jew.” (2005:Introduction).

85. Andrzejewski lived close to the ghetto walls in 1943 when he wrote the original version of the novel, which has several autobiographical elements. It was not immediately published and appeared in a much-revised edition in 1946. See Coates (2000b:25-26), Rostropowicz Clark (2007), Swan (2007), and Haltof (2011:201) for a discussion of the origins of and changes to the novel. [[return to page 5](#)]

86. All references in this paper to the novel *Holy Week* refer to the English translation by Oscar Swan (Andrzejewski 2007).

87. Davies convincingly argues that the Polish resistance was not strong enough to provide a greater level of support until the more general Warsaw uprising of 1944 (2001:63-8).

88. I am indebted to Mike Stevenson, Elzbieta Ostrowska, and Oscar Swan, for providing me with a copy of the film and English subtitles for the dialogue. The translation of the subtitles is a collective work of Professor Swan and his students at the University of Pittsburgh.

89. The opening sequence of the film is based on the short story, “Silence,” in (Borowski 1976).

90. The battle of Grunwald is regarded as the most important in Polish history as it epitomises the victory of Poland against invaders. For a short summary see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Grunwald.

91. The missal would appear to be Catholic but hides the Hebrew text.

92. Jedwabne, a small town in north-eastern Poland came under German control in June 1941. A few weeks later, on July 10th, a group of Poles massacred several hundred of the town’s 900 to 1600 Jewish population while others failed to intervene. A report by Poland’s Institute of National Memory in July 2002 concluded that at least 350 men, women, and children were murdered and that the Polish population played a central role in the massacre. Others, including Jan Gross in his book *Neighbors* (2001) argue that all 1600 Jews were killed. For an account of the Jedwabne controversy, and links to related articles see <http://info-poland.buffalo.edu/classroom/J/> , Mach (2013), Knap (2013), and Polonsky (2009).

93. The Jewish population of Poland is tiny, around 10,000. See Salmonowicz (1997:54).

94. Their attacks on *Promised Land* and *Korczak* argued that he consistently defames Jews and that his films suppress anti-Jewish activity in favor of showing Polish heroism. See Fogler (1996b).

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The telenovela uses several colloquial Hindi phrases like those that follow:



Namaste is a customary Hindu greeting which means the divinity in me bows to the divinity in you.



Arrey Baba means Oh, my goodness.

“Made in Bollywood”: Indian popular culture in Brazil's *Caminho das Índias*

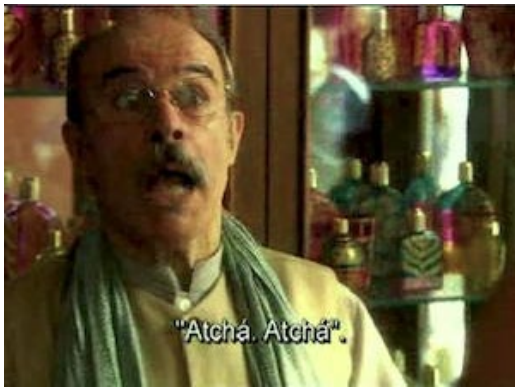
by [Swapnil Rai](#)

A year after the release of *Slumdog Millionaire*, Brazil's Rede Globo came up with one of its most popular and expensive telenovelas, *Caminho das Índias*. Ethnically convincing Brazilian actors in sparkling saris dancing to Bollywood songs, enacting melodramatic gestures interspersed with colloquial Hindi like “*arrey baba* (oh, my goodness), “*bhagwan ke liye*” (for God's sake), this telenovela captured the essence of Bollywood. *Caminho das Índias* (literal translation: Path to the Indies) or *India—A Love Story* (2009) proved to be an astounding success in Brazil with over 35 million viewers; it went on to win an international Emmy for Best Telenovela in 2009.[1][[open endnotes in new window](#)] The Spanish version of the telenovela broadcast in the United States by Telefutura outperformed its rival networks in ratings (Villarreal 2010).

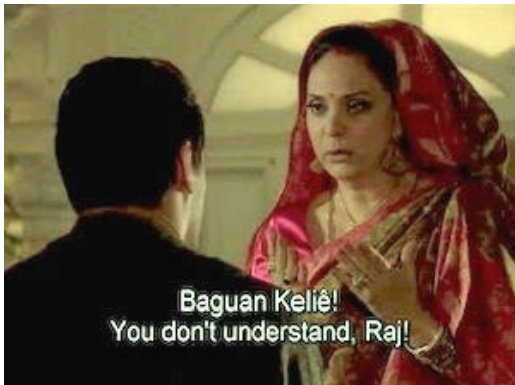
This Bollywood-like Brazilian telenovela is an instance of global flow of popular culture, more specifically the flow of Indian popular culture. Bollywood becomes the mirror through which the vision of India is constructed in Brazilian imagination and televisual landscape. This paper attempts to locate the Bollywood influences within the narrative through the telenovela's use of common Bollywood tropes such as song and dance, similar storylines, dialogue, and other thematic and aesthetic features. The paper also analyzes the sociological, commercial and economic aspects of such a production to assess why would Brazilian telenovela producers choose to make a telenovela ostensibly about India? Given the importance of the emerging BRICS economies (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) that make up over 40 percent of the world's population and are the world's fast rising entertainment markets, I articulate *Caminho das Índias* as a new form of south-south media flow and a viable alternate media space. I explore the cultural justification for a production like *Caminho das Índias* that portrays a complex subject such as caste in India and delve into cultural homologies between India and Brazil to assess the audience appeal and commercial success of such a production.

Introduction to Bollywood

Mainstream Indian Hindi Cinema, aka Bollywood, is one of the biggest cultural industries in the world. Bollywood is the informal name for India's Mumbai-based Hindi language commercial film industry. Bollywood is a portmanteau term made up of Bombay (former name of Mumbai) and Hollywood. In the 1970s a journalist first used the term and it gradually gained currency. It was added to the Oxford dictionary in 2003 as an informal name for “Indian popular film industry based in Bombay.”



Accha means OK.



Bhagwan Ke Liye means For God's sake.

Opening scene of *Caminhos das Índias*:

Apart from mainstream Bollywood films (i.e. films made in India's national language Hindi), the Indian film industry produces films in regional Indian languages as well. The sheer diversity and number of films produced in India is staggering. India produces nearly 1000 films every year in twelve different languages. The Indian film industry is the largest in the world in terms of number of films produced and movie theater admissions each year. Song and dance sequences are integral to Bollywood films. The films are largely melodramatic and Indian culture affects Bollywood's plot lines, characters and song sequences (Indian Entertainment Industry Focus 2010: Dreams to Reality 2010, Gopal and Moorti 2008, Ganti 2004). This paper however, is focused exclusively on India's mainstream Hindi language film industry or Bollywood. In recent years, Bollywood has made significant inroads into the global popular culture and is attempting to establish itself as an international brand (Kavoori and Punathambekar 2008, Rai 2009).

Introduction to the telenovela

Brazilian telenovelas are "popular prime-time serial melodrama" (La Pastina 2001). The telenovela is an extremely popular genre and a symbol of Brazilian and Latin American audio-visual entertainment. TV Globo is the largest telenovela producer in Brazil and its telenovelas are exported to over 130 countries (Globo in the World 2008). Gundo Rial Y Costas discusses the Brazilian telenovela as an extension of the country's strong oral tradition and Latin America's most emblematic genre. The genre according to Costas acts as a forum for public debates and the depictions in the telenovela are often "fragments of the real" (Costas 2011). Brazilian telenovelas perform specific social functions—namely i) pedagogical, ii) collective memory and iii) consolidation of identity. The pedagogical function relies "partly on the appropriation of cultural literary heritage for the production of numerous TV adaptations, as well as on the 'social merchandising' of telenovelas" (Thomas 2011). Social merchandising is a specific type of marketing that that sells awareness instead of products; the awareness issues though are decided by the writers and network executives (Singhal and Cody 2003). The social merchandising therefore has a hegemonic structure.

"Unlike commercial product placements which are mostly defined by the network's marketing and advertising departments ...social issue insertions were generally based on the writer's personal agenda... Recently, Globo, development organizations and scriptwriters work collectively to create intentional, programmatic agendas that dictate the type of pro social issue inserted into the narrative. Lobbying efforts by different organizations help prompt TV Globo to adopt an official position supporting the inclusion of socio-educational messages in its telenovelas." (Singhal and Cody 2003, 267)

It is evident that the subject of any telenovela and the representation of a pro-social issue emerges from the socio-political context of Brazil and is influenced by political/corporate leadership and their agendas. The depiction of India in a specific manner in a telenovela is therefore not merely a fictional narrative



The telenovela's opening scene features the *ghats* (riverbank) of Varanasi, India's ancient and holiest city.



Shankar walking down the steps of the *ghat* (riverbank).



Vista of the river Ganga.

about an exotic country, it holds socio-political significance and stands to greatly influence future policy making and the common perception of India in Brazil. Additionally, the Brazilian television network Rede Globo has a history of close ties with the political administration. Costas elaborates on this history and points out that close ties between the production company Rede Globo and Brazil's military dictatorship led to the telenovela's evolution into a form that 'narrated the nation.' This alliance led to the telenovela becoming a part of the national collective and integral to Brazilian national identity. Hence it is imperative to analyze the political and global focus of any telenovela in terms of diplomatic ties, government policy and agenda represented through the telenovela and the resultant economic, socio-cultural impact.

With the formation of the BRICS forum India and Brazil have attempted to establish ties in multiple arenas and *Caminhos das Indias* can be studied as a media text that is emblematic of the effort. However, the telenovela is immensely significant merely for the fact that it brings together two of the world's largest entertainment industries in the global south.

Bollywood and the telenovela

Caminho das Indias aired in Brazil from January 19th to September 11th 2009 and aired in the United States on TeleFutura from October of the following year. The coverage in the United States was centered on the telenovela's Bollywood connection. An article in the Los Angeles Times called it "Bollywood-like Brazilian telenovela, which showcases Indian mores in a story of forbidden love" (Villarreal 2010). TeleFutura's website called it "a Bollywood soap opera" (Venant 2010). The Bollywood connection was obvious because of the storyline itself and the licensed Bollywood songs and music extensively used throughout the telenovela, as well as other aesthetic factors including shooting on location with a part Indian crew.

The telenovela was a first partnership of any kind between the two industries. The international promo of the telenovela accentuated this relationship with Bollywood with bold text accompanying the visuals that framed the telenovela as made in Bollywood.[3] Bollywood's Brazil connection can be traced to the film *Dhoom II* that was filmed in Rio de Janeiro.[4] The plot presented Rio as a desirable tourist destination (a common practice in Bollywood Films) (Rai 2009). Thereafter, Giselli Monteiro a Brazilian model was cast in a cameo role in the 2009 film *Love Aaj Kal*. [5] However, these connections were related primarily with Bollywood's globalization rather than an effort to forge a partnership with Brazil. However, post *Caminho das Indias* there have been new developments that indicate recognition of Brazil as a viable partner.

One of the early attempts to venture into the Latin American entertainment market was the Bollywood film *Kites* (2010). The film starred popular Bollywood actor Hrithik Roshan and Mexican actress Barbara Mori. Three different versions of the film were released, a Hindi version, an English version along with a Spanish one on 2300 screens worldwide (Press Trust of India 2010). However, *Kites* failed miserably at the box office. The film was criticized



A sadhu (hermit) meditating on the banks of the Ganga.

for being too Hollywood-like:

“[it seems] the producers did not realize that for the same ticket price, the audience could watch a real Hollywood movie, instead of a movie pretending to be a Hollywood movie” (Kaul 2010).

After *Caminho das Indias* not only have Bollywood films found distributors in Brazil,[6] celebrated Indian director Anurag Kashyap is co-producing a film with Brazilian filmmaker Beatriz Seigner, Bollywood’s first ever South American co-production (Sreeharsha 2012).

Caminho das Indias therefore occupies a distinctive space as a media text that not only epitomizes a unique media flow and contraflow[7] but also creates and presages the possibility of co-productions that would be “Made in Bollywood.” The following section traces the telenovela’s Bollywood influences.

Locating Bollywood in song and dance

Song and dance numbers are a quintessential element of any Bollywood film and *Caminho das Indias* extensively appropriates popular Bollywood film music. Some songs from the Bollywood hits like *Umrao Jaan* (2006), *Salaam-e-Ishq: A tribute to love* (2007), *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* (2005), *Bunty aur Bubli* (2005) are used multiple times, often as narrative tropes. It is therefore important to analyze the function of song and dance in a Bollywood film to evaluate and the compare the ways in which song and dance is employed in the telenovela. Song and dance are integral to the Bollywood genre and have emerged from an extensive literary and dramatic tradition that was “similarly coded” (Mishra 2009). Mishra traces the song and dance tradition back to Kalidasa, fourth century classical Sanskrit playwright. He recalls a scene from Kalidasa’s *Shakuntalam* to explicate the dramatic codes for the song and dance to be performed. The stage narrator (*Sutradhar*) in Kalidasa’s play asserts that a song must be sung in a certain way that brings “metaphor and feeling together” (Mishra, 248). It should also be accessible to the common folks hence the actress in the play sings it in the vernacular rather than Sanskrit, a rendering applauded by the stage-director.

Through Kalidasa’s example Mishra clearly lays out the tradition in which the Bollywood song and dance was born. Song functions as a performance in a dramatic narrative. Its vernacular language sets it apart from the rest of the narrative, which was in classical language in Kalidasa’s time. The subject of the songs predominantly centered on love, desire and change of seasons and was structured within the realm of the pastoral and the romantic.

As a nascent film industry sought to define and create its conventions in early 1900s, Parsi theater was also a great influence. Parsi theater was a modern theatrical tradition started by the Parsi Zoroastrian community in India.[8] Folk theater had existed in India for a long time. However, the unique contribution of Parsi theater lies in amalgamating diverse cultural influences ranging from classical Sanskrit drama and Urdu poetry to colonial British dramatic traditions. The end outcome was a modern theater movement that was unique and accessible to the masses because the plays incorporated vernacular languages and traveling theater companies (PARZOR - The UNESCO Parsi - Zoroastrian Project n.d.). Tejaswini Ganti points to the founding role Parsi theater groups played by providing the “initial pool of performers and writers” (Ganti 2004).

“With its assimilation of diverse influences – Shakespeare, Persian



Establishing shot of devotees praying to the Sun God and river Ganga.



On the banks of the river Ganga in Varanasi Shanker a devout and learned Brahmin prays to the river deity.



He chants "*jai Ganga Mata ki*" (Hail, Mother Ganga/Ganges).

lyric poetry, Indian folk traditions, and Sanskrit drama; an operatic structure integrating songs into the narrative; dominant genres being the historical, mythological, and romantic melodrama; and the use of the Urdu language, Parsi theater was the immediate aesthetic and cultural antecedent of popular Hindi cinema." (Ganti 2004, 8)

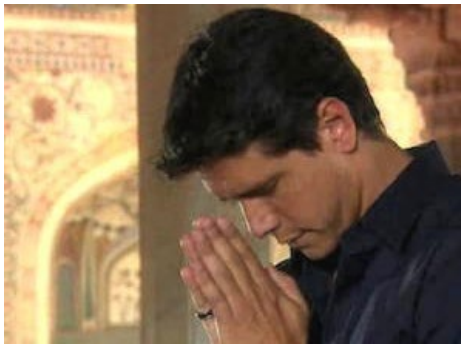
Although the historical antecedents of Bollywood cinema have been traced back to theater, the role of songs in a Bollywood narrative has been often debated. Are the songs extraneous to the narrative or do they perform specific functions within the story? As Ganti and other scholars have argued the songs are an essential component of a Bollywood film and unlike the west, the Indian subcontinent's oral culture accords music "an expressive equivalence to speech" (Vasudevan 2000, 9). Also, songs and music are integral to Indian life – all rituals pertaining to worship, festivities or life events such as birth and marriage are celebrated through songs and music and are therefore similarly represented through Bollywood (Morcom 2007). Also, Bollywood films are predominantly melodramatic and music is an essential component of the melodramatic mode since it heightens the melodrama (Elsaesser 1987).

From the above discussion it can be surmised that within a typical Bollywood narrative song and dance perform the following functions:

- introduce characters
- define characters/ community
- advance the plot (in some cases)
- express love and advance courtship (with change of seasons being a popular metaphor for articulating love)
- provide psychological perspective on characters
- mirror the cultural practice of song and dance by incorporating them in depiction of festivities, marriages etc
- enhance and aid the melodramatic mode of the film.

Song and dance sequences in *Caminho das Indias* perform the same functions. The first episode begins by introducing the lead protagonist Bahuan through a song. "Azeem o Shan Shahanshah" from *Jodha Akbar* (2008) plays in the background amid festivities welcoming Bahuan upon his return from the United States. Adorned elephants and Indian dancers in colorful costumes move to the lyrics of this popular Bollywood song, with stylization and sets closely reminiscent of Bollywood's historical romance set in the 16th century, *Jodha Akbar* (2008). In the original Bollywood feature this song is sung in praise of King Akbar and as a narrative device expresses his grandeur and his popularity among his subjects. Transposed onto the telenovela the song expresses the grand return of a rich man's son. This becomes a tactical introduction because Bahuan's grandeur is later subverted by identifying him as an adopted *dalit* (untouchable caste) son of a rich Brahmin. Song is therefore used as a strategic introductory device.

Maya and Bahuan's first meeting:



Maya and Bahuan meet for the first time in a temple immediately following Bahuan's introduction.



She showers rose petals on the statue of the deity.



Their love at first sight is conveyed through a song: "I have fallen for your style."



She glances coyly.



Bahuan is captivated by Maya's beauty.



They both shower rose petals on Lord Ganesha



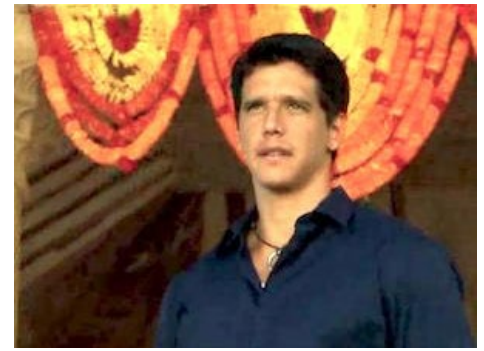
The priest notices them, mistakenly thinks they are a couple and blesses them.



Maya blushes at the priest's confusion, a mix of embarrassment and delight.



Maya glances at Bahuan as she leaves the temple precincts.



Bahuan sighs and looks at her longingly.

Maya and Bahuan meet for the first time in a temple immediately following Bahuan's introduction. Their love at first sight is conveyed through a song. The lyrics *tumhari addao pe main vari vari* (I have fallen for your style) from the film *Mangal Pandey-The Rising* (2005) translate Maya and Bahuan's mutual emotions as Maya continues to shower rose petals on the Hindu deity Ganesha while coyly glancing at Bahuan who appears mesmerized by Maya. In this case the song introduces us to the couple as well as advances the plot by depicting them falling in love.

Song and dance also function as a recurrent theme in telenovela to express the characters' emotions and romantic sojourn. The song *salaam karne ki aarjoo* from the Bollywood film *Umrao Jaan* (2006) is used multiple times in the telenovela. In the context of the Bollywood film the song is sung by a courtesan to entice her male audience. The lyrics express the courtesan's desire to engage in a romantic relationship. In the telenovela, the female protagonist Maya dances to this song for the first time when she is in a relationship with Bahuan. [9] The set mirrors the courtesan's abode or *kotha* as depicted in Bollywood films. Maya's gestures and moves are sensual as she attempts to entice her lover in a perfect romantic setting. Maya and Bahuan's romance goes awry when Maya's family discover that Bahuan is a *dalit*.

The second occasion for the song is after Maya is married to Raj.[10] Maya's betrothal to Raj is arranged by her family and the second time she performs to this song in her bedroom, she is reconciling with her new life with Raj. The fact that Raj plays the same song evokes memories of Bahuan yet she is able to perform, and as the song progresses express some emotions for her husband Raj. This reveals that she is trying settle into her marriage. Maya and Raj dance together again to the same song for a third time later on in the telenovela when Maya and Raj are in love.[11] Raj joins Maya in the performance and the dance ends in a passionate kiss. The song therefore becomes emblematic of Maya's romantic journey. As a repeated theme the song occurs at different times to reflect Maya's emotional and romantic state and the extent of her emotional involvement in the relationship. This type of song usage clearly expresses love and is used for advancing courtship within the narrative. It also provides the viewers a perspective on Maya's state of mind and her psychological engagement with the two men at different stages in the story.

The telenovela is interspersed with songs that reflect the life-cycle rituals marriage, birth and the like. The very first episode depicts a wedding in Maya's family where everyone is engaged in dance and celebration. The joyous and colorful occasion in India cuts to a dry urban landscape and then an airport to signify that we are not in festive India anymore but in Brazil. Although the language of the telenovela is Portuguese, it is interspersed with colloquial Hindi when the location of the scene is India. Additionally, songs that are set in India are popular Bollywood songs. The song and dance sequences and the melodious cultural rhythms are used as markers of Indian cultural identity and juxtaposed



In a Bollywood film a courtesan's song and dance expresses ...



... her desire to engage in a romantic relationship.



In the telenovela, the female protagonist Maya dances to a Bollywood courtesan song for the first time when she is in a relationship with Bahuan.



The set mirrors the courtesan's abode or *kotha* as depicted in Bollywood films.

to western culture. However, in terms of usage the song and dance become markers of the Indian community and its lifestyle, a representation not very divergent from a mainstream Bollywood film that centers on celebrations and festivities to establish an “Indian” cultural identity. The telenovela incorporates songs at every occasion, be it weddings, welcoming guests, festivals or merely celebrating the rhythms of the everyday. The use of the Bollywood song becomes a narrative trope that defines Indian culture as celebratory and Bollywood-esque.

Caminho das Indias too employs songs in similar ways to express melodrama. In a scene featuring Maya and her conniving sister-in-law melodrama is evoked as they challenge each other with dance moves that are novice and comical renditions of Bollywood dance. The snake dance made popular through a host of Bollywood films like *Nagin* (1954), *Nagin* (1976), *Nagina* (1986), *Nigahen* (1989) etc. (that draw on Indian mythology of snakes morphing into humans hence dancing like a snake in their human form) is reproduced (through a few common steps) as the two sister-in-laws express their pent up hostility for each other through dance. In terms of content and subject matter *Caminho das Indias* is also reminiscent of Indian Television’s family intrigue stories popularly known as *saas-bahu* (mother-in-law – daughter-in-law) sagas.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Locating Bollywood in the story

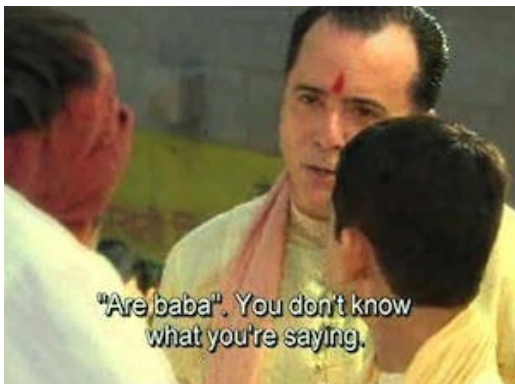
Shankar and Opash confrontation:



The boy Bahuan, an untouchable.



"We are all the same."



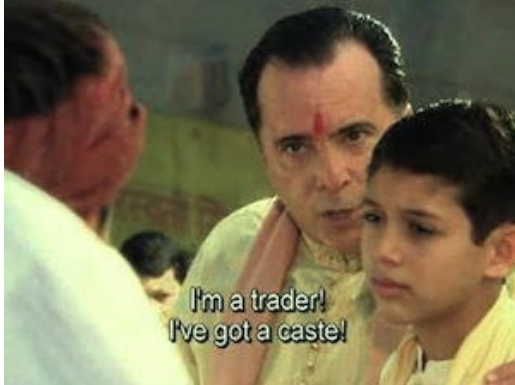
"You don't know what you are saying."

In terms of subject matter the telenovela evokes the classic Bollywood story line. It begins as a story of impossible and forbidden love; caste difference separates the lovelorn protagonists. From Himanshu Rai's *Achhut Kanya*/Untouchable Girl (1936) to Shyam Benegal's *Ankur*/The Seedling (1974), Satyajit Ray's *Sadgati*/The Deliverance (1981), Shekhar Kapoor's *Bandit Queen* (1993), K. Bikram Singh's *Tarpan*/The Absolution (1994) to the more recent films *Aarakshan*/Reservation (2011) and *Khap* (2011), there have been many alternative Bollywood narratives that overtly address the issue of caste based discrimination in India. Even within the more mainstream "masala" Bollywood fare such as *Omkara* (2006, a remake of Shakespeare's *Othello* where the black moor was substituted by a low caste political gangster) and *Eklavya –The Royal Guard* (2007) caste difference is often the main source of conflict (Dhaliwal 2010).

Achhut Kanya/ *Untouchable Girl* (1936) was one of the first representations of the caste issue through film. It was the love story of an untouchable girl and a Brahmin boy. Then came Bimal Roy's *Sujata* (1959) that portrayed the suffering and predicaments of an untouchable girl growing up in a Brahmin family. These early films placed caste difference at the center of the romantic conflict in the story. However, the lower caste protagonists in both these films are women, *Omkara* Bollywood's more recent romances on the other hand is the story of a lower caste male protagonist. He is the illegitimate son of a lower caste woman and a high caste politician; hence his real caste status is "debatable." The community though thinks of him as a low caste "bastard" but refrains from discriminating against him since Omi possesses a lot of political influence. He falls in love and elopes with his sweetheart Dolly, the local lawyer's daughter who happens to be a Brahmin.[12] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] This transgression causes resentment and furor in the community. Like *Omkara*, Bahuan's caste status in the telenovela remains ambiguous (he is the adopted Dalit son of a rich Brahmin man) until he falls in love with Maya and wants to marry her. The telenovela also features a scene where Bahuan tries to elope with Maya on her wedding day. This scene is strikingly similar to *Omkara* where Omi elopes with Dolly on the day of Dolly's wedding. Additionally, the popular song *Beedi Jalaile* from the film *Omkara* features in the opening credits of all episodes of the telenovela. Evidently, class conflict as represented in *Omkara* appears to be an inspiration for *Caminho das Índias*.

Breaking caste and class barriers has been a running theme in Bollywood films. There are numerous other films that highlight caste and related class difference as the main cause that prevents the lovers from getting married. Some Bollywood films merely use caste difference as a plotline while several others offer a sensitive portrayal of caste and usually have a reformatory focus; *Caminho das Índias* and its representation of caste falls somewhere between these two. The opening scene of *Caminho das Índias* begins on the banks of the river Ganga in Varanasi where Shankar a devout and learned Brahmin prays to the river deity and chants "jai Ganga Mata ki" (hail mother Ganga/Ganges).[13] The atmosphere is one of religious devotion and piety that gets disrupted when Opash's (another devout offering prayers on the steps of the *ghat*[14]) son touches a *dalit*[15] boy. The son is reprimanded by Opash for touching an untouchable. Shankar, who had been observing the scene, comes to

dalit boy's rescue.



"I am a trader. I have a caste."

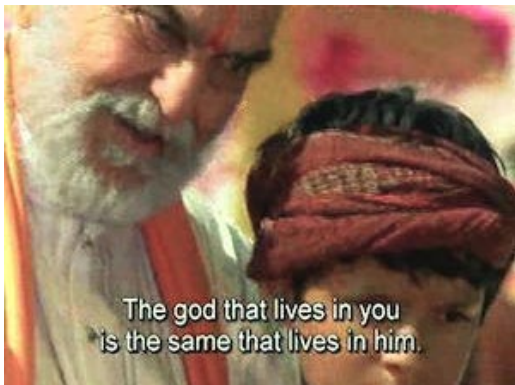
Shankar: *Bhagwan ke Liye* (For God's sake), nobody is untouchable, we are all the same

Opash: *Arrey Baba* (Oh, my goodness), you don't know what you are saying. An untouchable the same as me? I am a Vaishya? I am a trader, I've got caste. Step back boy.

Shankar: The God that lives in you is the same that lives in him. Are you telling a God to step back from you?"

This exchange between Shankar and Opash sets the tone for the telenovela.

- It identifies caste as an important social issue that will be relevant to the story and plot.
- It shows the perspective of the telenovela as reformatory.
- It advances the plot by identifying the lead protagonists Raj and Bahuan and establishes caste as a divisive line between them.
- And lastly, because of the exchange Shankar learns that the Dalit boy's parents die due to caste atrocities and adopts him as his own son.



"The god that lives in you is the same that lives in him."

Much like Bimal Roy's *Sujata*, the *dalit* boy Bahuan is brought up by a Brahmin family and like *Sujata*, Bahuan too feels and understands that he is different. Upon his return from the United States after getting a Ph.D. in informatics Bahuan tells Shankar about a job offer he has received and expresses his intent to live in United States. Shankar responds by saying that "going to college in the U.S. does not make you American." Bahuan then points to the stigma and detrimental social status he possesses in his homeland because of his caste. Although he is not American, in the US he will "not be a dalit."

Despite inheriting Shankar's legacy and possessions Bahuan loses Maya because of his caste. Her family opposes their marriage because Bahuan is a *dalit*. The treatment of caste in the telenovela is more complex than caste being a simple hurdle to love. The telenovela attempts to explicate the creation of caste, its functions and lived reality for people of different castes. Class and caste intersect in a curious way for Bahuan who is an upper class *dalit* educated abroad because he was fortunate to be adopted by Shankar. To contrast Bahuan's privilege, the telenovela introduces another *dalit* boy Hari. Although Bahuan is aware of the travails of Hari, Bahuan's class status conflicts with his caste affiliation and he does not prevent any discrimination against Hari. The telenovela's exploration of the issue of caste is multifaceted however the primary lens through which the caste plot is constructed is one of Bollywood. It straddles between the simple Bollywood narrative that pits caste as a hurdle the lovers must overcome and more complex Bollywood representations that treat caste as a social problem.

Treating caste as a social issue and problem dovetails neatly with the social functions performed by the telenovela genre (J. Straubhaar 1988) (Porto 2011).



Telling god to step back?

"In the course of its development, the [Brazilian] telenovela started to incorporate an 'explicit pedagogical action' that presents itself at a deliberate way, and whose speech brings explanations, conceptualizations and definitions, and finally, it shapes the public opinion about the addressed social themes" (Vassalo de Lopes 2009).

These telenovelas perform an overt pedagogical function by presenting "social merchandising" that brings to the forefront a certain conduct, position and behavioural response to societal questions" (Thomas 2011). For *Caminho das Índias*' social merchandising the author Gloria Perez focused on psychic

disorders and the social treatment of people with mental disabilities through a couple of minor Brazilian characters Yvone and Tarsus. Tarsus is the son of Ramiro the co-owner of a Brazilian firm Cadore which does business with Raj and Bahuan's India based ventures. Yvone, is a seductress who entices Raul, Ramiro's brother also a co-owner of Cadore. Yvone is depicted as a psychopath whereas Tarsus suffers chronic depression. However, for the Indian representation, caste, Indian customs and family ties remained the primary social focus that again emphasizes the telenovela's Bollywood influence.

Due to its rootedness in oral culture, "Hindi film dramas are we-inflected [i.e. they focus on the collective joint family rather than the individual]... [and] consistently and continuously conserve the traditional order." (Nayar 2004, 17). A typical Bollywood story therefore privileges parental control over a young couple's romantic desires. A stereotypical Bollywood storyline is usually about forbidden love.

- The love is forbidden or unrequited due to caste, class or other social differences.[16]
- Generational difference becomes prominent because elders do not understand young love and often present the primary hurdle.
- All these struggles are presented with a healthy dose of melodrama and a happy ending for everyone concerned.

Several of these typical traits hark back to Nayar's argument about oral roots of India's cinema and hence the cinema's communal rather than individual inflection. The films are also "tradition-refining" rather than "originality seeking" a distinction David Bordwell makes when comparing Chinese popular cinema with the west.[17] The term "tradition refining" equally applies to a Bollywood storyline.

Caminho das Indias closely adheres to the stereotypical formula where Maya's family object to her marriage with Bahuan because he is a Dalit and at the same time Raj is forbidden from marrying his Brazilian girlfriend Duda because she is a foreigner. The two heart-broken souls find comfort in each other as their families lure them into arranged marriages. The generational difference between the old and young become apparent when the elders explain to their belligerent children why an arranged marriage is best suited for them. In a melodramatic scene reminiscent of Indian soap operas and Hindi films, Raj's elaborately dressed mom exhorts lord Shiva to "light the wisdom lights" in her son's head and tells her son that she will fast every Monday till he changes his mind about the Brazilian girl Duda, the foreigner whom he wants to marry. The elaborate costume, sets and profuse melodrama also evoke India's *saas-bahu*[18] sagas popularized by Ekta Kapoor.[19]

Maya and Surya fight in the kitchen:



In *Caminho das Indias* the ongoing rivalry between ...



... the main female protagonist Maya and ...



... her sister-in-law Surya ...



Maya confronts Surya.

... is one of the most entertaining evocations of the *saas-bahu* genre.



The two women have a fight ...



... in the kitchen ...



... throwing utensils at each other.



Maya throws a plate at Surya.



Surya ducks.



Hearing the ruckus in the kitchen, their father-in-law Opash intervenes.



Opash shows controlled anger of the "patriarch" whereas his wife Indra goes hysterical.



Maya and Surya stop the fight and listen to his chiding.



Opash warns them not to repeat such behavior again or there will be consequences.

There is a popular adage in Indian culture that when a woman gets married she doesn't just marry her husband but his entire family. Ekta Kapoor's soap operas epitomize the adage with heightened drama and melodrama which mostly unfolds in the kitchen and the family living room. The soaps focus on the trials and tribulations of the daughter-in-law as she battles with her vile and malicious mother-in-law and sisters-in-law. In *Caminho das Índias* the ongoing rivalry between the main female protagonist Maya and her sister-in-law Surya is one of the most entertaining evocations of the *saas-bahu* genre. Feeling insecure upon the arrival of Maya, the family's new daughter-in-law, Surya resorts to petty villainy like secretly putting salt instead of sugar in the tea that Maya brews for the elders in the family. She also tells Maya that her husband had an affair with a Brazilian woman and still has feelings for her in order to create a rift between the newly married couple. Maya's discomfort with Surya builds up and the two women have a fight in the kitchen. They keep throwing utensils at each other until their father-in-law Opash intervenes and threatens to "return" them to their parents.

Dance between Maya and Raj:



Maya dances for her husband Raj.



Maya's gestures and the setting evokes Bollywood's courtesan genre.

There are many other instances in the telenovela where similar situations are enacted. Kitchen politics, rivalry among the women in the family and extramarital affairs are at the core of the Indian soap opera genre popularized by Ekta Kapoor which is reenacted in the telenovela. However, the Indian soaps too borrow heavily from Bollywood in terms of aesthetics and stylization as well as music. So there is a transitive relationship between Indian soap opera inspired parts of *Caminho das Índias* and Bollywood as well.

In sum, *Caminho das Índias* is a Bollywood-esque narrative where social and family pressures prevail; the protagonists Raj and Maya offer meek opposition to their families when the families try to get their marriage arranged. Upholding tradition is paramount in the story; the telenovela emphasizes the rituals accompanying Indian social life, be it warding off the effects of a *Manglik*[20] spouse in a Hindu marriage or fasting for *Karva Chauth*. [21] The milieu evoked resembles the colorful India of festivals, marriages and song and dance presented through Hindi cinema. [22] In the telenovela communal values supersede individual desires, another common narrative trope in Bollywood. However the telenovela is different because the episodic nature of the telenovela renders/requires its plotline to be more complicated than a three hour Bollywood feature. *Caminho das Índias* for instance featured 203 episodes and was telecast in Brazil every week day at prime time from January 2009 to September 2009, the average length of each episode was about fifty minutes. Since telenovelas have a finite story arc yet they are beamed every day, they feature several intermeshing minor storylines within the main narrative. The plot therefore is akin to Ekta Kapoor's *saas bahu* (mother-in-law daughter-in-law) sagas on Indian TV that weave similarly intricate plotlines where the married woman's ex-lover or boyfriend (unable to forget her) keeps reappearing in her life. The social order however, is restored and all the loose ends are neatly



Raj looks on while Maya dances for him



In the courtesan genre flickering flame symbolizes passion.



Maya glances at Raj seductively.



Raj smiles in approval.

tied together when Maya is reunited with her husband Raj.

Locating Bollywood in language

Caminho das Indias abounds with Hindi phrases like “*Arrey Baba*” (Oh, my goodness), “*Bhagwan Ke Liye*” (For God’s sake) and hindi words like *chalo* (let’s go) *accha* (okay), *namaste* (customary Hindu greeting which means the divinity in me bows to the divinity in you). All these are common cultural phrases heavily used in Bollywood films. Several Bollywood songs begin with the word *arrey baba*. *Ruk Ruk Ruk Arrey Baba Ruk* was a popular song from the 1994 Bollywood film *Vijaypath* and *Arrey Baba Arrey Baba Karey Kya Deewana* was another well-known song from *Auzaar* (1997). *Bhagwan Ke Liye* is another melodramatic phrase that is integral to Bollywood films. Often used to express shock or dismay, *Bhagwan Ke Liye* amplifies melodrama. *Arrey Baba*, another popular colloquial term connotes frustration with the situation at hand.

It is evident that Bollywood has been important in the conceptualization and production of the telenovela. There is a self-reflexive acknowledgement and homage to Bollywood in a scene where Maya along with Raj and his family members watch *Jodha Akbar* in a movie theater and try to mimic the emotions, exuberant celebration and dance enacted on the screen.

The aesthetics and stylization of the telenovela are closely based on Bollywood. The sets closely resemble Bollywood film sets. For instance Maya Meetha performs to the song *Tumhari mehfil main aa gaye hain* from the 2006 Bollywood film *Umrao Jaan* for the first time in a setting that is similar to the original. The general appearance and look for Maya Meetha’s character were based on Bollywood actor Aishwarya Rai . Juliana Paes who played Maya in the telenovela asserts that they tried to “find a balance between the everyday life of Indians and the glitz of Bollywood.” However, in the series in the fashion of a typical Indian soap opera “everyone is dressed for a wedding, even if they are just stepping out to the shops or a casual lunch” (Mathur 2009).

Additionally, everything depicted in the telenovela is explained through Bollywood celebrity practice. In order to lend credibility and establish the contemporaneity of her cultural translation of India, Gloria Perez alludes to Bollywood celebrities and their embodiment of those cultural, religious symbols and practices. There are several instances in the narrative of the telenovela, the accompanying authorial voice through Gloria’s blog and the Rede Globo website that substantiate this. In the telenovela the female lead character, Maya, is a *Manglik*. In Hindu customs pertaining to marriage, astrology is emphasized and being *Manglik* (i.e. Mars in a particular position in a person’s birth chart) is considered a *dosha* (flaw) because it indicates difficulties in marriage and marital life. It is believed that the negative consequences of the flaw can be resolved if the *Manglik* performs a *kumbh vivah* before their actual marriage. In the *kumbh vivah* ceremony the person with the *Manglik dosha* marries a tree or a silver or gold idol of Lord Vishnu, a Hindu deity. The ceremony is said to ward off the negative effects of *Manglik dosha*. Perez explains the concept and its depiction in the telenovela in her blog using Bollywood celebrity actor Aishwarya Rai’s *kumbh vivah*[23] as the exemplary instantiation of this Hindu tradition:



Raj joins Maya in the performance and the dance ends in a passionate kiss. The song therefore becomes emblematic of Maya's romantic journey.

“In the telenovela Maya marries a tree, there may be curiosity among you all to go search and understand about *Manglik dosha*. In India there are thousands of marriages to trees and animals to break the *Manglik* curse. Indian actress Aishwarya is a “Manglik”, to break her *Manglik* flaw she married a tree.” (Perez 2009)

Another instance of celebrity embodiment of cultural practices can be found in Perez’s post about *Karva Chauth* where she mentions Bollywood celebrity Aishwarya again and quotes the actress talking about the religious fast she observes for her husband’s well-being.

Evidently, the author’s translation of India for the telenovela audience is filtered through a Bollywood lens whereby celebrity embodiment provides justification of cultural and religious practices. Bollywood and Indian popular culture in essence epitomize India in the telenovela.

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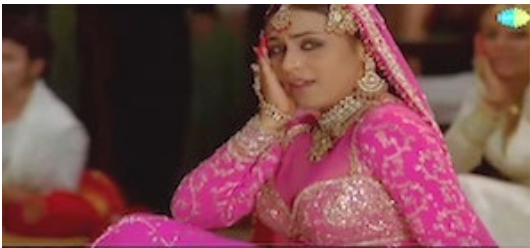
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Why Bollywood? Why India?



The song *Kajrare* from the Bollywood film *Bunty aur Babli* (2005, dir: Shaad Ali) is used in the telenovela several times. Maya's dance features the flickering flame in a similar way to allude to passion and desire.



The song *Tumhari Aadaon Pe Main Vari Vari* featured in Bollywood film *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* (2005, dir: Ketan Mehta) is used as a leitmotif for Maya's romantic journey.



A still from the song *Beedi Jalaile* from Bollywood film *Omkaara* (2006, dir: Vishal Bhardwaj). This is the theme song of the telenovela.

The primary question that needs to be delved into is why would Brazilian telenovela producers choose to make a telenovela ostensibly about India? While it is true that there have been several Brazilian telenovelas about foreign countries such as United States, Morocco, Turkey etc. most of them written by Gloria Perez, *Caminho das Indias* is different from the earlier and succeeding telenovelas. Perez's first telenovela *America* (2005) was set in the United States however the focus was on the Brazilian migrant and the liminal spaces she occupied. The telenovela resonated with debates on Latin American immigration to the United States. Perez followed it up with another story set in "exotic" Morocco. The story however centered on Jade, a Brazilian who had to move to Morocco because her only surviving relative lived there. The other main characters, the Feraz family visit Morocco on vacation; their travel representative of the new socio-economic status of Brazil's rising middle class[24] (Pezzini 2012). [[open endnotes in new window](#)] Perez followed up *Caminho das Indias* with *Salve Jorge* (2012) a story about human trafficking set in Turkey. The female protagonist Morena is brought to Turkey through human trafficking. *Caminho das Indias* stands apart from all of the other Perez telenovelas set in exotic lands because the main protagonist in India's story are Indian[25] unlike the other narratives that feature the trials and travails of the Brazilian in a foreign land. The story is about Indian characters and their global movement and migration. Why would a network like Rede Globo produce a story about India and a successful telenovela writer Perez explore India as the subject for her story?

Brazil and India have shared geopolitical and socio-cultural correspondences in the past. However, Indo-Brazil ties are increasing being highlighted for their economic correspondences. India and Brazil were clubbed together as emerging economies when Jim O'Neill (chairman Goldman Sachs) coined the acronym BRIC in 2001. The Goldman Sachs report predicted that the BRIC countries will overtake the G6 nations that include the United States, Japan, Britain, Germany, France and Italy in terms of gross domestic product or GDP by 2050.[26] As a cascading effect Brazil and India started to be looked at and analyzed on comparable terms. The ensuing "mediascapes"[27] abounded with discussions linking India and Brazil thereby making India a part of the Brazilian global imaginary. The BRIC coinage also had a tangible effect on political relations between India and Brazil that contributed significantly to the mediascape. India and Brazil first came together as a political forum under the aegis of IBSA (India, Brazil, South Africa) a tripartite group for international co-operation and then followed the BRIC road. Whereas IBSA was more focused on co-operation on international issues the BRIC umbrella included a distinct economic and political focus.

Oliver Stuenkel in his analysis of Indo-Brazil relationship points out that until the 1960's Brazil and India shared a strained diplomatic relationship because of Brazil's support of Portuguese occupation of Goa.[28] India



Salve Jorge (2012) was Gloria Perez's next telenovela after *Caminho das Índias*. It is the story of an eighteen year old single Brazilian mother who becomes a victim of human trafficking and is sold at a brothel in Istanbul, Turkey.



The telenovela *O Clone* preceded *Caminho das Índias*. The story centered on Jade, a Brazilian who had to move to Morocco because her only surviving relative lived there. *Caminho das Índias* on the other featured Indians living in India as the main protagonists.



BRICS leaders at the most recent summit held in July 2014 in Brazil.

expected Brazil to support India's claim over Goa because like India Brazil was an ex-colony too and India hoped that the Brazilian leadership would understand India's demand for Portuguese retreat from Goa. Brazil however supported Portugal's position on the issue and also acted as an intermediary for Portugal after India severed all diplomatic ties with Portugal.[29] Thereafter, India and Brazil shared a lukewarm relationship. Although, political leadership evoked former colonial past and cultural ties with a common anecdote about Alvarez Cabral's accidental discovery of Brazil on his way to India, Indo Brazil relations were limited due to various reasons.

"While Brazil was geopolitically tied to the United States, India turned out to be much more aligned with the Soviet Union. In 1976, a constitutional amendment was passed to make India a socialist republic. Ten years later, India unofficially invited Brazil to turn into a full member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) to balance leftist radical countries, but Brazil declined and preferred to remain an observer. Throughout the decades bilateral ties remained minimum, and in 1990, less than 100 Brazilians lived in India. (Stuenkel 2010)

The strained political relations limited the socio-cultural or economic exchange between the two countries. However, the coinage BRIC (an interesting example of media agenda setting) revived the dormant relationship. It is also worthwhile to note here that Latin America has had a very limited number of diasporic Indians mostly concentrated in Northern Chile, Brazil and Bolivia (Indian Council of World Affairs n.d.). As Stuenkel points out, "After IBSA, the G20 in the WTO and the G4, the BRIC label provided [them] yet another opportunity to engage." (Stuenkel 2010, 294). This level of focused political engagement is bound to impact media coverage thereby creating a curiosity and interest in Brazil's new partner in the new "global world order." It is not surprising then that Rede Globo chose to produce an India centric telenovela (the same year as the first BRIC summit) that delved into the history and culture of the country, albeit through a Bollywood lens.

Expectedly, the telenovela was articulated as a media soft power by B.S. Prakash, India's ambassador to Brazil.

"In the political and economic arenas, relations between Brazil and India are very strong, with both countries being considered emerging powers. However, when it comes to the cultural aspects, Brazilians know very little about India. I think the soap opera is a way of making Brazilians curious about our country" (Almeida 2009).

In one of the early journalistic articles about the telenovela Romil Gautam, wrote that "acquisitions and partnerships in Brazil are a foot in the door for Indian IT and telecom looking to expand into the Latin American market." [30] He also connected the mediascape produced by the telenovela to the burgeoning prospective business opportunities.

"Singlehandedly, the telenovela [*Caminho das Índias*] took the Brazil-India connection from the dry world of the boardroom and beamed it straight into Brazil's living rooms. And the burgeoning relationship did not stop there. A.R. Rahman's



Pedro Alvarez Cabral a trusted courtier of King Manuel I was sent on an expedition to India. His ships crossed the Atlantic at its narrowest point and accidentally reached Brazil. For more see <http://www.historytoday.com/richard-cavendish/cabral-discovers-brazil>

tunes suddenly blared in markets and discos, Brazilian women sported bindis, and my Brazilian friends all wanted to know if I knew how to make chai.” (Gautam 2010)

Given the economic impetus of the BRICS, Brazil and India are working on different partnerships and Information Technology is a major area of interest. Brazil will be hosting some of the biggest sporting events like the soccer world cup in 2014 and the Olympics two years hence thereby creating a huge demand for IT services. Shobhan Saxena sums up the Indian market sentiment:

“Indians .. looked at Latin America in such stereotypical terms. But then Indian IT firms discovered the truth: the region is politically vibrant, economically booming, has a huge talent pool of multi-lingual, cost-effective professionals, which could be used in a near-shore business model to service their North American clients for 12 hours from the same time zone and the remaining 12 hours from India.” (Saxena 2013)

Not only does Brazil offer a lucrative market on its own terms, Indian firms operating through Brazil have a time advantage that would enable them to service their North American clients as well. Predictably, leading Indian IT companies Infosys and HCL set up their Brazilian business centers in 2009 the same as the telenovela’s broadcast and the first BRIC summit. Additionally, India has also established trade relations with other Latin American countries like Argentina, Bolivia, Chile and Venezuela.

“India is now a palpable economic presence from the Caribbean to Uruguay...Since 2000, Indian companies have invested about USD 12 billion in the region in information technology, pharmaceuticals, agrochemicals, mining, energy and manufacturing...In total, some 35,000 Latin Americans work for Indian companies in the region today- more than half in IT, business process outsourcing and knowledge process outsourcing” (Heine and Viswanathan 2011).

It is hardly surprising then that the lead characters in the telenovela Bahuan and Raj are IT professionals. The plot makes an obvious connection with dominant discourse with respect to India and Indo-Brazil relationship. Bahuan holds a degree in computer science from the United States and in the latter half of the telenovela stars his own entrepreneurial venture whereas Raj, educated in the UK, works on integrating IT into his family’s textile business. Both characters seek partnerships with Brazilian firms.

In recent years both India and Brazil have emerged as growing economies with a rising middle class and consequently a rising demand for domestic entertainment (Nayyar 2008). Choosing India as the subject and setting for a story offered a different yet comparable culture with caste being a social issue that was akin to the issue of race in Brazil. Race is a pervasive force in Brazilian society and black groups are demanding legal actions toward equality (Buckley 2000). Determining racial origins in Brazil is not always as easy as the activists claim. In 2007 one of two identical twins (who both applied to enter the University of Brasília) was classified as black, the other as white. (Affirming a Divide 2012). In Brazil race is determined not by family lineage but by appearance hence the twin brother who looked white was categorized as white while the other was not. Caste system in India

offers a completely different perspective on a comparable issue of discrimination against a particular group. Caste is determined by birth and there is little a person can do to change it. Physical appearance does not factor into the equation. Although, much like inequality perpetrated through race a lower caste person also belongs to a lower class. Since India's independence, affirmative action policies for people of lower caste have helped the lower castes reach equitable status. Similar affirmative action reform is being demanded by blacks in Brazil. India therefore becomes an interesting subject to study because it is a comparable economy dealing with a related issue. Choosing to portray a subject like caste also evokes a kind of cultural proximity[32] that the audiences can relate to.

Since we have paid close attention to mediascapes that informed and led to the production of this telenovela, it is imperative to acknowledge the possible influence of a major India-centric film and Bollywood co-production that pervaded the global imaginary a year before the telenovela, *Slumdog Millionaire*.

The *Slumdog* effect

Slumdog Millionaire (2008) was a film that brought Bollywood into the global cultural lexicon. On the film's release, Gloria Perez the writer of *Caminho das Indias* commented on her blog *A bit of everything*:

“Very soon, the film should be released in Brazil. You will recognize the customs, the way of seeing the world, the path that India is showing to you. Yeah, this globalizing world is increasing people's interest in different cultures.” (Perez 2009)

It is evident that *Slumdog* was a determining factor in her decision to depict the same customs and way of seeing the world through her own telenovela. International media reception of *Caminho das Indias* emphasized its connection to *Slumdog* and Bollywood. Sara Oliveira, a journalist writing from Portugal, pointed the contrast between Boyle's India and the one created through the telenovela. The telenovela “belongs to a class that lives without difficulty” whereas the film *Slumdog Millionaire* shows images of “India as poor, violent.” (Oliveira 2009). Similarly, the US broadcast of the Spanish version of *Caminho das Indias* was painted in the *Slumdog*/Bollywood hue. The Univision website announced the broadcast as “India, una telenovela con aire de Bollywood” (India, a Bollywood soap opera)

Slumdog and with it the global popularity of all things Bollywood can be clearly attributed as one of the reasons Rede Globo conceived of *Caminho das Indias* as a viable production. The transnational appeal of the telenovela, as the earlier examples have pointed out, hinged on the global popularity of Bollywood in the wake of *Slumdog*. The success of *Slumdog Millionaire* made the world turn to India for a slice of its thriving film industry's cost-effective “exoticism,” *Caminho das Indias* exemplifies this trend, although in a limited way. *Slumdog Millionaire* is a classic example of cinema that by its very nature enables global, cultural, social and economic exchange (O'Regan 2004). *Caminho das Indias* is a similarly interesting production and media flow that came into existence because of cultural, social and economic exchange and would propel similar flows.

Why is this relevant?



Slumdog Millionaire (2008, dir: Danny Boyle) is the story of Jamal Malik, a penniless orphan raised in the slums of Mumbai who becomes a millionaire by winning the TV game show *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*.



Slumdog Millionaire, based on the novel *Q & A* by Indian author and diplomat Vikas Swarup, won eight Academy Awards including best picture.

Caminho das Indias inhabits a unique temporal space that emerges from a specific political, economic and socio-cultural context. Bollywood's global appeal and Brazil's bilateral ties with India inform this unique text that explores social systems like caste and Indian cultural practices to create content that engages Brazil's domestic viewers as well as a global audience. It uses a Bollywood lens to recreate India in Brazilian imagination, an exercise (as the Indian ambassador claimed) in media soft power. The telenovela presents a mediascape that by its very nature creates and fosters future economic and socio-cultural flows but more importantly is a non-hegemonic contraflow. With Brazil and India both being large-scale media producers possessing a rising middle class with high disposable incomes and hence a significant domestic market, the telenovela represents a new type of cultural and media flow that creates the possibility of an alternative, non-eurocentric BRICS media space.

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Notes

1. Varanasi is the holiest of the seven sacred cities in Hindu religion. [[return to page 1](#)]
2. See *Caminho das Indias* international trailer.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BG3DT1Y5Kzo>
3. See above
4. See <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0441048/locations>
5. See http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1275863/fullcredits?ref_=tt_ov_st_sm#cast
6. See (Salem 2012).
7. Dayakishan Thussu defines 'dominant [media] flows,' as programming largely emanating from the global North, with the United States at its core; followed by contra-flows that originate from the erstwhile peripheries of global media industries (Thussu 2006).
8. Parsi – Zoroastrian : Parsis follow the religion of Zoroaster, an Iranian prophet of the seventh century B. C.. The Parsis emigrated to India from Persia to avoid religious persecution by the Muslims. They arrived in India in the 8th century. See Encyclopedia Britannica - Parsi n.d..
9. Bahuan : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IgueeRkfPN4>
10. Raj 1: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IH75LJBkvTo>
11. Raj 2: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KMSK8ZvjQYs>
12. Brahmin is the highest caste in Hindu caste hierarchy. [[return to page 2](#)]
13. Ganga is a reference to the river Ganges and is personified as a goddess. The British referred to the river as Ganges. In Hindu religion it is believed that bathing in the river washes away sins and liberates the soul from the cycle of birth and death thereby facilitating moksha. The opening scene of the telenovela is shot in Varanasi on the bank of river Ganga.
14. Hindi word for riverbank.
15. Dalit is a designation for a group of people traditionally regarded

as untouchable. Dalits are a mixed population, consisting of numerous social groups from all over India; they speak a variety of languages and practice a multitude of religions .

16. Other social differences like family rivalry.

17. In *Planet Hong Kong* David Bordwell defines Chinese popular cinema's distinct aesthetic. He describes the films' form and energy as: (1) non-contemplative, (2) "Manichean", (3) loosely plotted (and of 'kaleidoscopic variety'), (5) kinesthetically arousing, (6) flashback using (7) tradition refining (as opposed to originality seeking western films), (8) favoring formulas and clichés, (9) brutal in their violence, (10) plagiaristic, and (11) possessing a tendency to "swerve into a happy ending."

18. Mother-in-law daughter-in-law saga.

19. Ekta Kapoor is an Indian TV and film producer. She is the Joint Managing Director and Creative Director of Balaji Telefilms, her production company. She has produced numerous soap opera, television series and movies.

20. *Mangal Dosha* is an astrological combination that occurs if Mars (astrology)(*Mangal*) is in the 1st, 2nd, 4th, 7th, 8th, or 12th house of the Vedic astrology Ascendant chart. A person born in the presence of this condition is termed a *manglik*. This condition is astrologically believed to be unfavorable for marriages, causing discomfort and tension in relationship, leading to severe disharmony among the spouses and eventually to other bigger problems. This is attributed to the "fiery" nature of Mars, the planet of war. (Source: Wikipedia)

21. *Karva Chauth* is an annual one-day festival celebrated by Hindu women in North India, the Indian state of Gujarat and parts of Pakistan in which married women fast from sunrise to moonrise for the safety and longevity of their husbands. (Source: Wikipedia)

22. Karan Johar type of films.

23. Indian men and women born as *Mangliks* are believed to be cursed. It is believed that *Mangalik Dosha* negatively impacts married life, causing tension and sometimes the untimely death of one of the partners. To cancel these effects, a *Kumbh Vivah* can be performed before the wedding. This is a wedding between a *Mangalik* and either a statue of Vishnu or an earthen pot or *peepal* or banana tree. Source: www.speakingtree.in **[THIS DOES NOT SEEM TO BE A VALID LINK]**

24. Thanks to a decrease in poverty from almost 40% of the population in 2001 to around 25% in 2009, 31 million people joined the middle class in Brazil. Today 52% of Brazil's population is middle class. [[return to page 3](#)]

25. Played by Brazilian actors.

26. The GDP indicates the market value of all final goods and services from a nation in a given year.

27. *Mediascapes* refer both to the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information (newspapers, magazines, television stations, film production studios, etc.), which are now available to a growing number of private and public interests throughout the world; and to the images of the world created by these media. These images of the world involve many complicated inflections, depending on their mode (documentary or entertainment), their hardware (electronic or pre-electronic), their audience (local, national or transnational) and the interests of those who own and control them. What is most important about these mediascapes is that they provide (especially in television film and cassette forms) large and complex repertoires of images, narratives and 'ethnoscapes' to viewers throughout the world, in which the world of commodities and the world of 'news' and politics are profoundly mixed. (Appadurai 1990)

28. The Portuguese colonized Goa in 1510 and it remained a colony until 1960. Portugal did not give up control over Goa at the end of British colonial rule in 1947. In December, 1961 Indian Army began military operations to seize control over Goa and declared Goa an Indian territory. [Source: Wikipedia]

29. Right Wing dictator of Portugal Antonio de Oliveira Salazar insisted that Goa and Daman and Diu were as Portuguese as Lisbon. He claimed that the territories were not colonies but "part of a metropolitan Portugal." See (Gavaghan 2013)

30. See (Gautam 2010).

31. See (Press Trust of India 2009) and (Infosys Technologies Opens its First Development Center in Brazil 2009).

32. The concept of cultural proximity (Straubhaar, 1991) in this case could be stretched to imply that a text can provide local viewers with ideological content that does not challenge or question the viewers' own values and beliefs but rather returns them to an idealized reception state in which telenovelas provide a melodramatic and safe cathartic space. See (Pastina and Straubhaar 2005).

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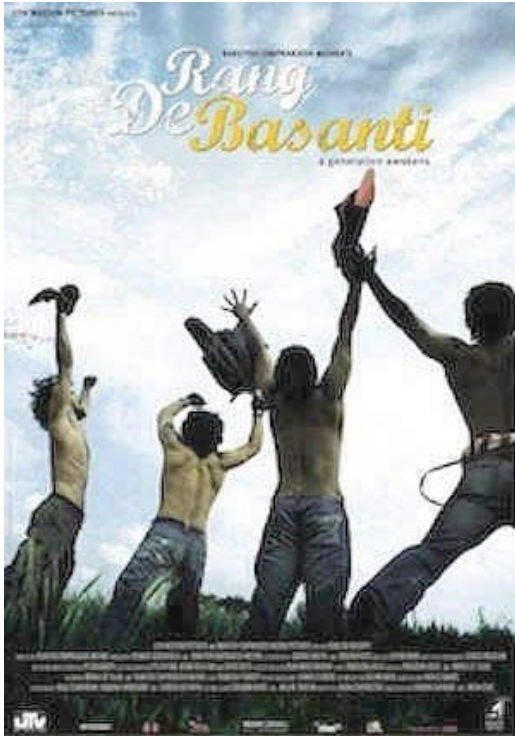
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Of radio, remix, and *Rang De Basanti*: rethinking history through film sound

by [Pavitra Sundar](#)



Rang De Basanti poster.



“RDB effect”: The candlelight vigil scene that prompted similar demonstrations by middle-class youth.

A curious aspect of Bollywood cinema in the first decade of the twenty-first century was its obsession with the past.[1][[open endnotes in new window](#)] Even as India rushed headlong into the future, so to speak, powered by neo-liberal economic reforms initiated in the early 1990s, the mainstream Hindi film industry produced numerous films dealing with history. Big-budget epics like *Asoka* (Santosh Sivan, 2001) and *Jodhaa Akbar* (Ashutosh Gowariker, 2008) conjured enchanted visions of the past, while more somber dramas like *Pinjar/Cage* (Chandraprakash Dwivedi, 2003) probed the wounds of Partition. [2] Films about Gandhi such as *Hey Ram!* (Kamal Haasan, 2000) and *Gandhi, My Father* (Feroz Abbas Khan, 2007) jostled for the public’s attention alongside those attempting to recuperate other figures instrumental in the freedom struggle including *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* (Rajkumar Santoshi, 2002), *Bose: the Forgotten Hero* (Shyam Benegal, 2004), and *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* (2005). While the phenomenal success of *Lagaan/Land Tax* (Ashutosh Gowariker, 2001) and *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha/Mutiny: A Love Story* (Anil Sharma, 2001)—two very different period films with disparate target audiences and politics—in the summer of 2001 may have bolstered this cinematic obsession with the past, this trend was also linked to a broader interest in history in the Indian public sphere at the time. The 50th anniversary of independence in 1997 and aggressive attempts by right-wing political parties to frame India as an exclusively “Hindu” country, both in public discourse and in educational curricula, inspired animated debates about the nation’s identity and history.

One film that stood out in this flurry of “historicals” is *Rang De Basanti/Color My Spring* (Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra, 2006, henceforth *RDB*).[3] Released worldwide on January 26, 2006, the day India celebrates as Republic Day,[4] *RDB* was an immediate box-office hit. It recovered the \$5.5 million spent in production costs within a week and went on to break records for overseas collection. It garnered a slew of accolades including nominations and awards for best film, best director, best music and best background score (both composed by A. R. Rahman), and best lyrics (Prasoon Joshi). More remarkable was the social and political impact of the film in India, what came to be dubbed the “*RDB* effect.” The film spurred middle class urbanites—youth in particular—into political debate and action in a way that few Hindi films previously had. The Indian blogosphere teemed with discussions of *RDB* and calls for civic participation.[5] For a brief while, candlelight vigils and protests of the kind depicted in the film became de rigeur. This enthusiastic journalistic and public response notwithstanding, there were those who criticized the film for the

“caricaturised [character of the] minister, the naive politics, the misplaced cause, the violent turn of events, the pat comparisons with the historical figures, [and] the far-fetched and confused finale.”[6]

Some critics also cautioned against the film’s regressive ideology as evidenced in its sidelining of female characters and its elite point of view, which is blind to the existence of lower classes and assumes that corruption is the most pressing problem facing the nation.[7] While I share many of these concerns, I submit that what is left out of most commentaries on *RDB* is the work that cinematic sound and music perform. To ignore the soundtrack is to miss this film’s primary means of engaging with the concept of history.

RDB teaches us that the nation’s past is incomprehensible without film sound, song, and music in India. It does so, I argue, via its focus on the figure of the deejay. The deejay has historically operated at the interstices of at least four media industries in India: music, radio, film, and television. All of these industries, the connections between them, and the technologies that sustain them are highlighted in *RDB*. While film music and its affiliated industries and technologies have played an important role in public debates over national identity, they are typically ignored in histories of both cinema and the nation. By adding sound and musical elements to the mix, I argue that *RDB* points to and partially fills this flagrant gap in the historical record.

But *RDB* does more than just correct the historical narrative. The argument that the nation’s history cannot be thought apart from aurality entails a reconceptualization of history itself. Rather than treating the past as a set of facts to be “discovered” and plotted onto a linear timeline, *RDB* urges us to think of it as a body of disparate, ephemeral fragments that can be narrativized in different ways. History is a narrative composed of (some of) those fragments, interpreted and remixed such that it speaks to the exigencies of the present. The reconfiguring of traditional boundaries of time-space in the *RDB* soundtrack liberates us not only from the oppression of the (colonial and contemporary) state but also, and more importantly, from its narrative about history. Cinematic sound and music in *RDB* are the primary means of moving from colonialism’s gift of “World-history” back to an older, more enchanted relationship between past and present: *itihasa*. [8]

The film effects this conceptual shift using an aural vocabulary. Not only does it give us a hero named DJ who is immersed in the world of film, music, and radio, it also consistently employs what I call a “deejay aesthetic.” Sampling, remixing, and layering sounds at will, the soundtrack connects the nation’s present with histories of struggle not typically highlighted in mainstream narratives about Indian nationalism, cinematic and otherwise. In so doing, it proposes an alternate genealogy for the nationalist (male) subject that helps rekindle patriotic fervor, both on screen and off.



In the film’s title song, dancing bhangra

The use of sound and music—and Hindi film music, in particular—to revive and rethink history is significant for a number of reasons. First, it urges us to write an aural history of the nation. In *RDB*’s reckoning, Hindi film music and its technologies have long played a starring role in the saga of the nation. The film asks us cinephiles to not just enjoy film music, but to appreciate its place in the nation’s history. In the face of a changing media industry and pronouncements about the death of the Hindi film song, *RDB* insists that film music and its

becomes a mark of patriotism.



Sue reading her grandfather James McKinley's diary, which records his experiences as a colonial jailer.

technologies have a crucial role to play in the future of the nation.[9] Second, in expertly deploying the musical vocabulary and style of the globalized present to deal with past, *RDB* makes both nationalism and history fashionable. These concepts are not just for the old or for fuddy-duddy types. To the contrary, they now seem hip, and this makes them all the more accessible and attractive to contemporary cosmopolitan youth. By the same token, casting *itihasa* as a remix unmoors the concept from its Indian and Hindu foundations. *Itihasa* is not just the realm of gods and ancient princes any more, but that of bhangra, rai, and Bollywood.[10] It is the idiom of global pop culture. Thus transformed, *itihasa* renews itself and its audiences.

Rang De Basanti: narratives of the past and the present

RDB gives us two interwoven narratives, one set in the present and the other in the past. The primary narrative begins with Sue McKinley, a young British filmmaker intent on making a docudrama about a group of famous Indian revolutionaries: Chandrashekhar Azad, Bhagat Singh, Ashfaqullah Khan, Ram Prasad Bismil, Hari Sivaram Rajguru, and Durgavati Devi. Sue is inspired by the account of the men's bravery in her grandfather's diary, recorded during his time as a colonial prison official in Lahore. Upon arriving in India, Sue is disheartened to find that the utopian ideals that drove the anti-colonial movement are nowhere to be found in contemporary India. But when she meets her friend Sonia's college buddies, DJ (played by the star Aamir Khan), Karan, Aslam, and Sukhi, she sees in them the spark of the earlier generation and decides to cast them in her film. Despite being extremely disillusioned and apathetic about the national state of affairs, the group agrees to play along, in part because of DJ's romantic interest in Sue. The amateur actors are joined by the local Hindutva activist Laxman Pandey, whom Sue also invites into the film. [11]



Sue coaxes her new friends DJ (in red shirt), Aslam, Karan, Sukhi, and Sonia to play the roles of Indian revolutionaries in her film.



Sue surveys her research material for the film.



Laxman Pandey reciting "Sarfarooshi ki Tamanna" from memory in a passionate, impromptu audition for the role of Ram Prasad Bismil.



In preparation for Sue's film shoot, DJ and Karan awkwardly assist Sukhi in tying a dhoti. Their obvious incompetence indicates how disconnected these "boys" are from their culture and their past.

Over the course of shooting, the four young men, once ignorant of the history of anti-colonial struggle, become radicalized. When Sonia's fiancé Ajay Rathod, an Indian Air Force pilot, is killed in a plane crash, DJ and his friends are

compelled to act. They protest the corruption and utter lack of concern on the part of the State that led to the purchase of defective aircraft, and thus to their friend's death. Once their peaceful protest is crushed and Ajay's mother slips into a coma as a result of her injuries, the group turns to violence. They kill the Defense Minister and then take over the All India Radio station in order to broadcast their crime to the world. Their public confession and the retaliatory violence of the State lead to a political awakening of youth across India. DJ and his friends martyr their lives in the name of the nation and social justice. The women, meanwhile, are left to mourn. Despite having supported the men all along, even inspired their sacrificial behavior, the four women closest to DJ's coterie (Sue, Sonia, DJ's mother, and Ajay's mother) are pushed aside, rendered silent witnesses to the historic and heroic actions of the nation's citizen-sons. [12]



DJ's comic rehearsal in front of a water buffalo shows how clueless he is about the past.



DJ is transformed into Chandrashekhar Azad. Projected onto his body is historical footage about British colonialism—he is now marked viscerally by the past.



Police brutality against non-violent protestors at the candlelight vigil for Ajay Rathod.



Karan and DJ on a motorbike as the latter prepares to shoot the Defense Minister.



Karan confesses their crimes over All India Radio.



Youth across the country are moved by DJ and his friends' heroism, and pledge to follow their lead.



Ajay's mother awakes from her coma just as military commandoes kill DJ and Karan at the radio station. The nationalist overtones here are unmistakable: Mother India



... weeps for her citizen-sons, but their sacrifice has not been in vain. DJ's mother also mourns for her son.

The film's secondary narrative, staged partly as a film within the film (that is, as the docudrama Sue produces), is the story of British atrocities against Indians



Film within the film: Sue, as director, calls the end of the shot in which Bhagat Singh (played by Karan) bids goodbye to his parents.

and the strident activism it engendered. Rendered in a much more fragmented and condensed manner, and thus demanding some audience knowledge of Indian political history, this narrative strand is critical to our understanding of the events in the present. Sue's cinematic vision revolves around the following historical events:

- the 1919 Jallianwala Bagh massacre, which left approximately 1000 Indians dead and several more injured;
- the Kakori train robbery of 1925 in which revolutionaries of the Hindustan (Socialist) Republican Association intercepted cash headed for the British treasury in Lucknow;
- the 1928 boycott of the Simon Commission, the all-British committee tasked with proposing changes to the colonial governance structure;
- the violent suppression of the Simon Commission protests, particularly in Lahore where Lala Lajpat Rai was gravely injured (the Indian National Congress leader succumbed to his injuries soon thereafter);
- retaliatory actions undertaken by Bhagat Singh, Chandrashekar Azad, and other comrades to avenge Lajpat Rai's death, including the killing of a police officer named John Saunders later that year, and the bombing and leafleting of the Central Legislative Assembly in 1929;
- the imprisonment and torture of the radical activists; and, finally,
- the hanging of Bhagat Singh, Rajguru, and Sukhdev in 1931.



The Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919: General Dyer orders his forces to shoot at hundreds of unarmed civilians in the enclosed public park.



The stampede sparked by British gunfire at Jallianwala Bagh.



A woman jumps into a well with her child to avoid being shot to death by Dyer's forces in Jallianwala Bagh.



The Kakori train robbery of 1925, the first sequence that Sue shoots with her motley crew.



The 1928 protests against the Simon Commission at Lahore, where the nationalist leader Lala Lajpat Rai is gravely injured.



Smile at the Gallows: The execution of Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev, and Rajguru in 1931.

The first and last events in this list—Jallianwala Bagh and Bhagat Singh's execution—occupy a central role in Sue's film and in *RDB*. Repeated multiple times, partly as nightmares that bleed into the present, they serve as originary moments for all the ensuing violence. If, as McKinley notes in the voice-over,



Bhagat Singh predicts that his death will inspire others to revolutionary action. The men's walk to the gallows is repeated in the film, establishing it as originary moment (along with

Jallianwala Bagh “made an essentially non-violent people consider taking up arms,” then the gallantry of the young Bhagat Singh and his friends ensures that their execution “is not the end, but the beginning. There will be others who follow in [their] wake” (these are Singh’s last words to McKinley).

RDB’s two narrative strands, separated by seven decades, are distinguished by the use of color for the present-day story and a sepia tone for the historical events. However, the parallels between the two storylines are evident in that the same actors play the roles of contemporary college students and of radical freedom fighters (for instance, Aamir Khan plays DJ as well as Chandrashekhar Azad). *RDB* thus encourages us to read the story of the past as the story of the present. It goes without saying that all the events in Sue’s film constitute landmark moments in early twentieth century Indian history. But the choice to highlight these, and only *these*, historical events and to organize them into a

Jallianwala Bagh) for the violence that follows.



The star Amir Khan plays both DJ and Azad. The two avatars cross time and space to meet in this split screen shot at the film's climax.



The book Bhagat Singh is reading right before he is led to the noose is one of the few signs of his socialist politics. In the next shot, the book cover with Lenin's name on it takes up the whole frame.



The second clue to Bhagat Singh and his friends' Bolshevism: the group takes an oath under a banner that reads "Hindustan Socialist Republican Association."

causal narrative has critical consequences. This particular rendering of history positions *RDB*'s protagonists as *nationalist* martyrs.

The film diminishes Bhagat Singh and his collaborators' internationalist, socialist political commitments.[13] One of the few moments when Bhagat Singh's Bolshevism is legible is just before his execution: "Wait a moment, Mr. McKinley," Singh tells the British jailer, "one revolutionary is meeting another"; on cue, we cut to a close-up of the book by Lenin that Bhagat Singh is reading. The only other clue to Bhagat Singh's leftist politics is in the "Lalkaar" (Clarion Call) sequence. Activists recite a version of Bismil's poem "Sarfarooshi ki Tamanna" as an oath standing under a banner that reads "Hindustan Socialist Republican Association." But *RDB* provides no commentary on the "socialism" in the title of this political organization.[14] Shorn of Marxist ideals, HSRA's concerns are reduced to a love for "Hindustan," another name for India. This erasure of the revolutionaries' political vision and affiliations works in tandem with the musical references to Algeria (discussed at length below).

Together, they propose an alternative to the hegemonic ideal of nationalist masculinity, as represented by Gandhi. As modern-day avatars of Azad and Bhagat Singh, men who were profoundly disillusioned with Gandhi's political philosophy, DJ and his buddies offer a more aggressive version of nationalist agency and heroism. The film's blurring of the boundaries between past and present even implies that the violence that DJ's group enacts is justified because it stems from and is a response to the Jallianwala Bagh massacre (and other brutal events like it). It is easy to see then why some scholars and critics would excoriate *RDB*. Given the ascendancy of Hindutva politics in the last two decades, particularly the right's attempts to whitewash history and rewrite it from an upper-caste Hindu perspective in school curricula, a selective or simplistic account of history can be dangerous. What I seek to demonstrate below is that attending to sound and music in *RDB* gives us an altogether different, more productive understanding of history—an understanding not just of India's past, but of how we come to organize disparate fragments of the past into a narrative we call history.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

DJ, radio, and remixes



DJ and his friends laugh and dance as they sing a romantic Hindi film song announcing that DJ has fallen for Sue.



DJ teases Sue with a version of the film song “Chookar Mere Man Ko” (Having touched my heart). In the “remix” that he and his friends croon, the lyrics are changed to “Sue-kar mere man ko.”



The tape deck that opens the “Masti Ki Patshala” (School of Fun) song sequence.

That *RDB* claims a special place for sound and music in its revised understanding of the past is clear in the name of its chief protagonist, DJ or Daljeet. The name DJ recalls a musical actor: a deejay, a disc jockey, a turntablist. While our hero is not strictly a musician, he loves songs. His constant quoting of Hindi film songs and the name he goes by link him to the world of sound and music. His name casts him as a music-maker, someone who manipulates and creatively (re)arranges music. DJ’s real first name, Daljeet, references his Punjabi lineage and upbringing, his ethnic and religious identity. But, like Sue, we do not find out that DJ is short for Daljeet until halfway into the movie.^[15][\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) The foregrounding of our hero’s musical avatar via the name DJ signals a certain self-consciousness about the place of music in contemporary youth culture and in the life of the nation.

Both the quotidian nature and the importance of music are amply demonstrated by the way DJ and his friends routinely reference Hindi film songs. Their repertoire is impressive, extending from the 1960s through the 2000s. Among the songs they quote are: “Na Jaao Sainya” (*Sahib Bibi Aur Ghulam/Master, Wife, and Servant*, 1962), “Dil Cheez Kya Hain” (*Umrao Jaan*, 1981), “Chhookar Mere Man Ko” (*Yaarana/Friendship*, 1981), “Mainu Ishq Da Lagiya Rog” (*Dil Hai Ki Manta Nahi/The Heart Does Not Agree*, 1991) and “Khaliwali” (*Market*, 2003). These songs are part of their charming, entertaining banter; it is how they relate to one another. Having characters who routinely break into song in a realistic way (not simply in a discrete song-dance sequence) and who sometimes modify song lyrics to fit their own lives and particular dilemmas—e.g., when DJ turns “*Chookar mere man ko*” into “*Sue-kar mere man ko*” to tease his love interest—not only heightens the film’s realism for Indian audiences, it also uses song to remind us of the history of Hindi film and film reception. It acknowledges the cinephiles in the audience and stages how they keep alive older films and film songs.

One might even think of these musical quotations as remixes, since DJ and his friends repurpose the songs to fit their playful ribbing of one another. Their facility with older Hindi film songs and the glee with which they cite and rework these songs is a subtle reminder that deejaying in India owes its popularity to the history of television and radio as much as to film. As Shanti Kumar writes, it was “irreverent and parodic” music television shows like *Videocon Flashback* on Channel [V] that were “instrumental in rekindling young viewers’ interest in old Hindi film songs by giving them a new ironic, hip factor.”^[17] Channel [V] and MTV were also important channels for popularizing remixes of old Hindi film songs in the 1990s.

“Masti ki Patshala” (School of Fun), the song-dance sequence that introduces us to DJ’s carefree lifestyle, also pays tribute to Indian audiences’ love of music and cinema. The sequence opens with a close-up of a boom box with two cassettes sitting on top and with the play button depressed. Tapes, we well know from Peter Manuel’s key work in *Cassette Culture*, were critical to the widespread distribution and consumption of (film) music in India.^[18] For decades, “cassette culture” sustained fan communities and the popular music and film industries. The close-up shot that inaugurates “Masti ki Patshala” calls attention to the tape deck, and, by extension, to the history of film music in



The college students' fun quickly ends when the tape deck is kicked down the steps and the music is shut down.



Enter Laxman Pandey, self-appointed keeper of national culture.



The centrality of All India Radio to national political awakening. This and several other shots foreground the technological apparatus that broadcasts the young men's radical actions to the nation.



The FM radio show hosted by another college student, Rahul, becomes pivotal to Karan's invocation of a national community on air.

which it was a key player.[19] The song comes to an abrupt end when Laxman Pandey, the right-wing ideologue and self-appointed keeper of Indian culture, arrives with his goons. They knock the precious tape deck down the stairs and shut down the party. Later in the film, Pandey joins the good guys in their bid to save the nation. However, it is fitting that his initial villainy is expressed via disrespect for the music and the technology that are dear to DJ's group, not to mention to the film's audience. Moreover, Pandey's specific accusation in this scene, "*Band karo yeh nanga naach... puri desh ki sanskriti brasht kar di hain!*" ("Stop this naked dancing... [it has] destroyed the culture of the whole nation") echoes the anxiety that has long haunted song and dance performances construed as overly "modern" or "Western," and thus not Indian. As the song title aptly indicates, "*Masti ki Patshala*" (School of Fun) is about technologies of fun—film, music, dance—but also about the disciplining of fun and fandom in the name of national culture.

RDB homes in on one particular musical technology that has been the terrain for contentious debates over national culture and identity, and that is the radio. For much of the 1940s and 50s, under the leadership of B. V. Keskar, the state-run All India Radio (AIR) sought to "save" India's musical heritage and promote a "national music culture" by encouraging specific types of music—classical, light, and folk music—all of which were meant to "counter-blast bad film music." [20] The struggle between AIR and film producers meant that for a while film songs were completely absent from AIR. During this time, audiences tuned into Radio Ceylon to listen to their favorite music on "*Binaca Geetmala*" hosted by Ameen Sayani. Keskar capitulated in 1957 and allowed a special program of film music "*Vividh Bharati*."

The contest over radio broadcasting has continued into the present. Manisha Basu reminds us that the expansion of cable television networks in India in the 1990s was accompanied by the gradual expansion of FM radio broadcasting.[21] In 1999, the government inaugurated a new FM policy, inviting private broadcasters to apply for commercial licenses. This move was made in the context of considerable debate about the opening up of FM stations to foreign investment and undoing State monopoly of the medium. These concerns were of a piece with the rhetoric about the "invasion of the airwaves," an anxious response to the proliferation of private satellite television channels in the post-liberalization period.[22] Since radio "was still conceived principally as a portal for beguiling and 'false' entertainment rather than as a cultural-pedagogical tool" of the state, FM channels were not authorized to broadcast news.[23] In designating entertainment as the primary function of FM radio, the state set in motion one of the most important developments in the recent history of film and popular music: the boom in Indipop music and Hindi film song remixes.

RDB foregrounds both of the aforementioned aspects of radio history—its role in popularizing Hindi film music and in staging debates about the nation's identity—by staging the film's climax in the offices of AIR (in the nation's capital New Delhi no less). DJ and his friends storm the state-run radio station and interrupt a music program to broadcast their confession to the nation. Prior to this interruption, the radio deejay Rahul tells his listeners: "*Aaj kal naye gaane chalte nahi hain*" (These days new songs aren't popular). What is popular, he goes on to note, are the "deejay remixes" he plays on his show. He then mentions R. D. Burman and plays a tune by him.[24] This reference to the legendary music director is significant for Burman's "hip and energetic" music fusing Western rock, pop, and Indian music changed the sound of Hindi cinema



Rahul's "deejay remixes" music program is interrupted by Karan's confession about how he and his friends killed the nation's Defense Minister.

in the 1960s and 70s.[25] R. D. Burman enjoyed a spectacular posthumous comeback in the late 1990s in the remixes by Bally Sagoo and other deejays. As noted above, FM radio and music-television programming facilitated the remix boom that brought R.D. Burman back into fashion. Thus, Rahul's "deejay remixes" show underscores not just the cultural value of remixes but also the intertwined histories of radio, music, television, and film, and the national significance of these media.

RDB's focus on DJ and the various industries with which the figure of the deejay is associated brings out several points that have not been addressed adequately in histories of Hindi cinema. First, it demonstrates that "film shares deep connections with radio and television (and now, digital media)."[26] That *RDB* uses *musical* objects and entities—the deejay, tape deck, and radio—to recall key moments in the history of cinema in India is itself proof of the intertwined nature of these media. Second, *RDB* emphasizes the importance of these interrelated media forms to the history and future of the nation. If in earlier sepia sequences we see myriad images of newspapers and radios—for example, Sue's grandfather hears of Lala Lajpat Rai's death from the newspapers and over the radio—towards the end of the film, events of national import are communicated over radio and television. But, film, music, radio, and television are not merely technologies of entertainment, means of disseminating news and popularizing film songs. They are, in fact, the affective apparatus of the nation. The audience called forth by Rahul's radio show is reconstituted as the nation once the renegade youth begin speaking. When DJ and Karan confess their crimes on air, their voices occupy the same place as the film music they interrupt. They address and win over the same audiences. Music thus clears the space for the articulation of newly engaged sense of citizenship. It is especially crucial to note that DJ and his friends interrupt a radio show about *remixes*, that is, about songs that revitalized Hindi cinema's musical past. DJ and Karan take over the task of rearticulating history as they take control of the microphone. In the process, radio is shown to be more than just a site of consumption. It is a site where deejay and listeners collectively articulate their relationship to the nation and to history.



Newspaper headlines announcing Lala Lajpat Rai's death demonstrate the role of print technology in constituting the "horizontal community" of the nation.



McKinley listens to the radio for news of the fallout from Lajpat Rai's death.



Radio continues to broadcast events of national importance. This stereo sits at a roadside tea-stall.



Several shots of a bank of television screens establish the continuing importance of journalism and media technologies to the nation.



Television images show people consuming audio broadcasts of the news through transistor radios and cell phones.



College students gather around a car to listen to breaking news about their peers taking over the AIR radio station.

Aurality, itihasa, and deejay aesthetic



Ram Prasad Bismil's poem "Sarfaroshi ki Tamanna" is the inspiration for the oath in the "Lalkaar" (Clarion Call) sequence. The famous historical poem and Aamir Khan's distinctive delivery recall other films and film songs about radical activism in early 20th century India.



RDB begins in the offices of World Vision, the production company that cut off funding for Sue's film project.



All India Radio is the setting for the climax, marking a clear shift away from the colonizing "eye" of the West.



McKinley's typology of masculinity, outlined in his diary.

This brings me to a related argument *RDB* can help us make with regard to film, music, and history, one that goes beyond merely correcting the historical record on the development of nationalist sentiment. It is not just that film music has played an important role in the nation's history and must be included in the historical narrative. Rather, the history of the nation may be imagined—and, thus, *re-imagined*—in sound. Consider the numerous references to older Hindi film songs in *RDB*. These musical references provide as much of a history lesson as do the sepia sequences set in colonial India. In a sequence entitled "Lalkaar" (Clarion Call), the history of the nation coming into being merges with the history of cinematic representations—particularly *film musical* representations—about the nation. In this sepia sequence, we witness the steely determination of the anti-colonial revolutionaries of the Hindustan Socialist Republic Association and the 1928 protest against the Simon Commission as we hear the actor Aamir Khan reciting a version of Ram Prasad Bismil's poem "Sarfaroshi ki Tamanna." [27] Khan's voice and the title of the poem call up *Sarfarosh* (John Matthew Matthan, 1999), another hit film about nationalism in which Khan starred. Moreover, Bismil's poem was itself popularized through *Shaheed* (S. Ram Sharma, 1965)—a film about the life of Bhagat Singh starring the actor Manoj Kumar, also known as "Mr. Bharat" (or Mr. India) for his many patriotic roles—and *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* (2002). Both films also include songs entitled "Mere Rang De Basanti Chola." Not surprisingly, the title track of *RDB* was the bhangra hit "Rang De Basanti." Thus, in referencing radical poetry, *RDB*'s songs foreground their own genealogy. The film turns to itself and its post-independence musical past to articulate the nation's history of anti-colonial struggle. The history of the nation is the history film music. History, in other words, becomes an aural, musical entity.

In articulating the nation's past in aural terms, *RDB* challenges our attachment to an exclusively visual and textual understanding of the past. This point is, in some ways, a reversal of the previous claim: The idea is not just to treat aurality historically (i.e. to consider film music an historically relevant and important object) but to treat *history aurally*. This is not to say that history is exclusively aural. The past persists in the aural domain just as much as it does in the visual or textual archive. More to the point, the historian's task is similar to that of the deejay. To think of history as aural is to acknowledge that the past continues into the present as a set of diverse, disconnected, sometimes incompatible, fragments that we narrativize and re-narrativize constantly. Such a rethinking of history does not require that we prioritize the study of sound and music. Rather, it trains our attention on the contingent, the ephemeral, the fragment—and on the process of weaving those pieces into a new (still contingent) story. [28] To reconceptualize history thus is to make it more useable, more pliable, more responsive to the present.

A number of key plot details suggest such a reading of *RDB*. Whereas the contemporary narrative of *RDB* opens at the offices of World Vision in London, it comes to a climax at All India Radio in New Delhi. Sue's "vision" of a docudrama about Indian revolutionaries is inspired by a textual account of the men's bravery in her grandfather's diary. As an intensely personal account of the past, the diary entry stands outside and in tension with official history. [29] Nonetheless, it represents a colonial perspective that Sue increasingly sheds as she immerses herself in the world of DJ. Remember too that DJ plays Chandrashekhar Azad in Sue's film (the actor Aamir Khan plays both DJ and Azad). The word "Azad," Sue helpfully reminds her bosses at the television company World Vision, "means freedom." From the start, music is being proposed as the site for the articulation of *azadi*, freedom, a break from an

oppressive system, and those in power at World Vision—those existing in a solely visual economy—do not understand this.

The voice-overs that frame *RDB* are important in coaxing us away from a visual conception of the past to an aural one. In the opening sequence of the film (pre-credits), we witness an exchange between the revolutionary hero Bhagat Singh and the prison warden, James McKinley, who we learn is Sue's grandfather. As Sue reads from McKinley's diary, we hear the following words in his voice:

"I used to believe there are two kinds of men in this world: those who go to their death screaming and those who go to their death in silence. And then I met a third kind."

McKinley's words accompany Bhagat Singh and his comrades to the gallows. He adds that what he remembers

"above all else ... [are] his *eyes*: how they looked at [him], clear, defiant, never wavering."

The British jailor is haunted by the moment when he and the Indian prisoner locked eyes. This emphasis on the revolutionary hero's eyes is also evident in the opening shot of the film and the first shot of the title credits, both of which are close-ups of eyes. *RDB* opens with a close-up of eyes being lined with kohl. The first shot of the title-credits sequence (which follows the Bhagat Singh execution scene) also centers on a sketch of an eye. Juxtaposed with images of colonial violence, these eyes call up the panopticon and its power to discipline all those subjected to its gaze. By the end of *RDB*, this charged visual encounter between jailor and prisoner is replaced with an *aural* construction of history and heroism.[30]



Bhagat Singh locks eyes with James McKinley as he walks to his death. This charged ocular exchange is fundamental to the colonial jailer's account of the past.



Close-up of an eye being lined with kohl: the opening shot of *RDB* (prior to the title credits)



DJ and Karan's final moments captured in a freeze frame. Their laughter continues on the soundtrack, suggesting that the past lives on in sound.



Close-up of a sketch of an eye: the first shot of the title credits sequence



Juxtaposed with images of colonial violence and torture, the eyes of the initial sequences invoke the disciplinary power of the gaze.

The second time we hear James McKinley lay out his typology of heroic manhood is towards the end of the film. This time his voice-over is paired with a freeze-frame of DJ and Karan laughing just before they are gunned down at the AIR studio. As the two men joke (on air) about DJ's love for Sue, the commandoes enter the studio and open fire. In the last image we have of the two men, they are frozen in laughter looking straight at the camera. The staccato sound of gunfire signals their death—but a split second later, their



Sue and Sonia listen for traces of their friends and lovers' laughter in the wind.

laughter resumes. Thus, the soundtrack does not allow DJ and Karan to die “on screen.” The two men live on in sound. As their echoing laughter finally ceases, James McKinley re-enters the aural space with the voice-over that opened the film. His words reiterate that DJ and his friends have gone to their death—and indeed, have outlived it—not screaming nor in silence, but in laughter. This sharply aural representation is very different than the first instance of McKinley’s voice-over, where heroism and memory of the nation’s past are cast in terms of a visual exchange, one fraught, moreover, with the tensions of race, colonialism, and homosociality.

The emphasis on aurality, on the past persisting in sound, is evident not just in the sequence when Karan and DJ meet their end, but also in Sue’s memories of her deceased lover and friends. In the penultimate scene of the film, after all the bloodshed, Sue tells us in a voice-over that she and Sonia listen for aural traces of the men in the ruins of a fort that was the group’s “special place.”[31] What remains of the men is “*woh hasi, woh shabd, woh yaadein*” (that laughter, those words, those memories).[32] Sue conceives of her attachment to DJ and his immortality in aural terms. Her heroes and their stories linger as sonic fragments carried by the wind. In the “International Version” of the film (on the DVD), Sue’s voice-over is in English, rather than in the Hindi of the “Indian Version.” Sue’s English voice-over is even more explicit about the aural nature of her memories: what she and Sonia hear in their old hangout are “voices carried by the evening breeze—not words, just sounds: sounds of laughter.” In short, Sue’s and Sonia’s continued encounter with the past is not visual (or linguistic), as James McKinley’s was, so much as aural.[33]

In emphasizing the aural over the written and the visual, *RDB* challenges us to think of the past as *itihasa*. In his book *History at the Limit of World-History*, Ranajit Guha quotes Sanskrit scholar Daniel Ingalls on the meaning and structure of *itihasa*, the root of the modern-day Hindi term for history:

“In the Sanskrit from which it is taken, [*itihasa*] combines two indeclinables, *iti* and *ha*, with a verbal noun to produce a complex structure. “The word *iti*,’ says Daniel Ingalls, “functions like quotation marks in English to shift the denotandum from thing to word.” . . . [Together, *iti* and *ha*] turn something that has been or was (*asit*) into what has just been said about it.”[34]

Note how the notion of a story—particularly, a story that has been narrated out loud—is implicit in this definition: *itihasa* refers to “what has just been said” about what happened in the past. Guha argues that through repeated usage, the word *itihasa* or *itihasa* has come to refer to

“the repository of the tales told by tradition and bequeathed from one generation to the next since antiquity.”[35]

The Mahabharata and Ramayana are prime examples of this genre. Further, Guha asserts that until colonialism came along with its all-encompassing notion of “World-history,” *itihasa* was the dominant “paradigm of storytelling” in India.[36] A highly favored mode of recounting and remembering the past, *itihasa* thrives on endless repetition. I mean this in terms of the iterative and interlocking structure of the narratives, and the fact that this vast repertoire of stories was, and continues to be, passed down orally. *Itihasa* thus attests to “the story’s ability to renew itself in retelling.”[37] While colonial modernity did not completely destroy this narrative mode or the corpus of Hindu mythological

tales that fell under the sign of *itihasa*, it did shift the meaning of the term itself. *Itihasa* became synonymous with colonialism's "history," a disenchanted, written, and linear account of the past.[38]

This conceptual dominance of history over the old *itihasa* is not simply a vestige of colonial discourse. Dipesh Chakrabarty points out that the discipline of history itself relies on a continuous, linear, empty, and homogenous notion of time. Being a secular subject—rather, a "disenchanted" one, for it does not allow for super-human presence and agency—history does not adequately deal with what he calls "the times of gods." [39] History, like nation, necessarily papers over those experiences and claims that (to recast Benedict Anderson's words) bring the cosmos into the world.[40] Similarly, in an earlier essay on the topic, Ashis Nandy writes that while several historians and postcolonial critics have contested what counts officially as history, the discipline as a whole operates on the assumption that

"the idea of history itself cannot be relativized or contextualized beyond a point. . . . All critiques of history from within the modern worldview have also been ultimately historical." [41]

That is to say, while contemporary historical scholarship can admit that there are many who do not believe in the disenchanted notions of secularity and rationality on which history is based, and consequently live "outside history," it cannot grant much legitimacy to their "ahistorical" worldviews, their alternative narratives of the past.

RDB need not, and indeed *does not*, heed such modernist restrictions on conceptualizing the past. It is precisely the film's disrespect for conventional boundaries and rules of time-space that bind history that allows the men to become heroic agents in the nation. In other words, India comes alive in *RDB* when it is unhinged from the modern temporality of the nation, when history becomes *itihasa*. The move to *itihasa* is achieved through the "deejay aesthetic" of the soundtrack. Just as a deejay weaves sounds of varied textures and styles, sounds evoking vastly different sensations and memories, into a single mix, *RDB* brings together ideas, events, and figures from disparate contexts and time periods to tell a new story about the past. This new story is not a revisionist narrative so much as a way to rethink history by "thinking sound." In his meditation on the place of the sonic in African American experiences and theorizations of modernity, Alexander Weheliye illustrates the importance of

"'thinking sound' by interfacing historically seemingly disparate texts in order to excavate their intensities (which only emerge in the process of juxtaposition and recontextualization), much as DJs treat records in their mixes." [42]

It is precisely such sonic interfacing, such a respect for different temporalities, that *RDB*'s deejay aesthetic effects in order to turn DJ and his friends into revolutionary avatars.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Other times, other places



Title Credits Sequence: Historical newspaper headlines in Sue's research collage



Title Credits Sequence: Photographs and sketches of the Indian revolutionaries involved in the 1925 Kakori train robbery.



Title Credits Sequence: Photographs documenting Simon Commission protests, including one of Lala Lajpat Rai, the nationalist leader who lost his life from injuries sustained at the Lahore protest.

A particularly powerful example of the deejay aesthetic in *RDB* is the opening credit sequence. The camera moves rapidly and unsteadily, offering us brief glimpses into the material Sue has amassed in her research for her docudrama. We see close-ups of maps and newspaper headlines; photographs of famous activists, guns, and prison equipment; drawings and hand-written notes gesturing to iconic moments in the anti-colonial struggle [e.g., “Jallianwala Bagh,” “Simon Commission Protests,” and “Inquilab Zindabad” (Long Live the Revolution)]; and historical footage of British authorities beating protesters. As the credits flicker over these and other visual fragments of colonialism, women’s voices continue the wordless lament begun in the preceding execution scene. We hear Hindi lyrics in a male voice as well as some (indiscernible) Arabic words (e.g., “Ya Habibi”). Various turntable sounds—scratching, reverb, and echoes—make this song the musical equivalent of Sue’s collage of colonial violence.[43][[open endnotes in new window](#)]

The eerie soundscape bears some similarities with Algerian-born French artist Rachid Taha’s “Barra Barra,” a song denouncing violence and war. [44] Taha’s music is rooted in rock, punk, and rai, all musical genres associated with youth culture and dissent. While Indian audiences may not be familiar with this particular artist or number, they certainly know the Algerian genre of rai because of Cheb Khaled’s “Didi,” a song from his 1992 album *Khaled* that was extremely popular in Europe, the Middle East, and South Asia. As Khaled and other rai artists shot to fame worldwide in the late 1980s and 90s, the genre became synonymous with Algerian pop music. But this popularity did not blunt rai’s critical edge. The genre is still closely identified with urban life, youth, and social protest, and often courts the ire of government authorities, whether in Algeria or France. Thus, the sonic traces of Arabic, rai music, and mourning in the opening sequences are not simply throwaway references to the Arab world meant to appeal to young people’s cosmopolitan musical tastes. Rather, they evoke the revolutionary history of Algeria and the ongoing struggles of Arab youth vis-à-vis the state in different parts of the world.

It is important to note that the musical and political movements referenced here are not contemporaneous. Algeria attained independence in 1962; India in 1947. The Front de Libération Nationale (FLN), the organization that led the armed movement against French colonialism in Algeria, was started in 1954. Azad, Bismil, and the other Indian activists *RDB* holds up as models were active several decades earlier. The political events referenced in Sue’s film occurred mainly in the second and third decades of the twentieth century; Bhagat Singh and his comrades were executed in 1931. The history of rai music spans both these freedom struggles and extends into our contemporary moment. Rai began as folk music in 1930s but gained popularity as the music of youth and civic engagement several decades later. Thus, while not historically precise, the music that inaugurates *RDB* creates a powerful conceptual and affective link between



Title Credits Sequence: Archival film footage of colonial authorities pushing back Indian activists.



Title Credits Sequence: "Inquilab Zindabad" (Long live the revolution)



In the scene where DJ and his friends contemplate killing the Defense Minister, the visuals—color vs. sepia, differences in costumes of the 1930s and the present—

Algeria and India. It reframes the history of Indian nationalism such that Gandhi is no longer at the center. Instead, we find more Fanonian figures such as Azad and Bhagat Singh.[45] While the socialist politics of the HSRA and, in the case of Fanon, the FLN are erased from the film, what lingers in the aural domain is these groups' advocacy of armed struggle as a means to counter the extreme violence of the state. The path to national selfhood is now a path of violence. The music thus suggests different antecedents, a different genealogy for the nationalist male subject. The film's deejay aesthetic reaches to other times and other places not to uncover forgotten histories but to construct a very particular genealogy for the nation and its ideal subject.

The alternate genealogy *RDB* crafts for its Indian heroes through the deejay aesthetic is radical not simply because it takes us to Algeria, but because it disrupts the temporal logic that defines conventional understandings of history. A case in point is the sequence where DJ's coterie resolves to kill the Defense Minister. Scenes of the contemporary discussion are intercut with a scene depicting a similar conversation between Chandrashekhhar Azad and his colleagues about how to respond to Lala Lajpat Rai's death after he was beaten at a protest. We move with such rapidity between past and present that the historical and the contemporary figures appear one and the same. In this and other cross-temporal sequences, *RDB* deploys classic continuity editing strategies such as shot-reverse shot, eyeline match, and match on action to connect the two historical moments. And yet, the temporal distinction between past and present persists visually in the color of the images and the characters' clothing (very different in the 1930s than in the present).

In listening to the way sound operates in these sequences, we realize that the work of seamlessly merging past and present falls on the soundtrack. While the visuals switch dizzyingly between the sepia past and colorful present, the aural track smoothes over such disjunctures. Sound bridges are often used in cinema to create smooth transitions. What is different here—and what distinguishes sound continuity from the editing strategies mentioned earlier—is that sound is not merely a point of connection between the historical and contemporary moments. It extends across the past and present. In travelling back and forth across the past and present, sound erases the boundaries that keep in place a linear, disenchanted notion of history. In the critical conversation sequence described above, the borders between Azad's era and the present crumble as the *dialogue* between Azad/DJ and his collaborators and the *music* highlighting the shifting tenor of the conversation continue throughout the sequence. It is this aural erasure of time-space boundaries that transforms DJ into an avatar of Chandrashekhhar Azad, Karan into an avatar of Bhagat Singh. Sound fuses the two historical moments such that the men come to occupy a temporal space not contained by history as we know it.

In many ways, *RDB*'s deejay aesthetic works like a "maturation dissolve," Corey Creekmur's term for the visual technique commonly used in Hindi cinema from the 1940s well into the 1990s to depict the main character's transition from childhood to adulthood.[46] But whereas a maturation dissolve secures the protagonist's temporal position vis-à-vis his own history—it links the adult hero to his childhood—sound and music in *RDB* point to an alternate understanding of the past. The past that *RDB* calls up has nothing to do with DJ and his friends' personal history. Some of the



... keep in place the distinctions between past and present even as they suggest parallels between them.



But, as the sequence above shows, sound erases such distinctions by travelling seamlessly across the two temporal/spatial locations.

men in DJ's group have family connections, but we get no real sense of these characters' childhood or teenage years.

In this DJ and his cohort are very much like other Hindi film heroes of the post-liberalization period. Pondering why contemporary heroes are so rarely angry, Sudhanva Deshpande argues that post-liberalization heroes are given no history, no memory of past injustices.[47] Unlike Amitabh Bachchan's 1970s persona of the "angry young man," these new heroes are not haunted by the indignities they and the rest of their family suffered in the past. They have nothing to be angry about. DJ and his friends start off as typical post-liberalization heroes: carefree, childish, and cut off from history. Over the course of the film, they are granted a past—but the history they come to inhabit is not a private, personal one. The sepia sequences convey cinematic stories about other men in India's past; the music recalls revolutionary struggles in other time periods and other parts of the world. In short, *RDB* unites our contemporary heroes not with earlier versions of themselves, but with *other* versions of themselves. This casts the men as avatars, of course. It also teaches us that history—or, more precisely, *itihasa*—is as much about the past one has lived through, as it is about *other* times, *other* places.

Conclusion

While *RDB* is not a mythological—the genre that inaugurated Indian cinema—it does treat the past as *itihasa*. The film's treatment of sound and music highlights three critical characteristics of *itihasa*: orality, ephemerality, and continuity. *Itihasa* has historically been grounded in oral tradition. Memory of the past passes from one generation to the next through innumerable re-tellings of stories, often in oral form. But each performance, each rendition of the narrative is distinct from the next. Each telling is composed of fragments from the past reassembled and reconfigured in unique ways. Indeed, the continuity of the past rests on the ephemeral quality of performance, on the constant renewal of the story via retellings.

The renewal and re-narrativization of (aural) fragments is, in many ways, the task of the deejay. A deejay pieces together and creatively rearranges musical fragments from the past into a form that moves contemporary audiences. The deejay helps us hear the past in new and interesting ways. The sound of our martyred heroes' laughter in the All India Radio studio—indeed, the very centrality of radio in this film—and the aural rhetoric in Sue's voice-over help us grasp that the past persists in sound, in sonic fragments. But those voices from the past have to be re-interpreted to address the present. This is why DJ—and *deejaying*, broadly conceived—is critical to the nation.

One may well critique *RDB*'s deejay aesthetic as embracing too presentist and relativist a view of history. The first criticism is one that the film endorses all too happily. The point is to reignite a sense of nationalism for the present and the future, and this *RDB* certainly managed to accomplish. Where other "historical" films of the 2000s had a relatively short shelf life, *RDB* hit a chord with the public. Young people in particular were inspired to take to the streets in the name of the nation. As Ritesh Mehta rightly argues, while *RDB*-inspired mobilization around the Jessica Lal murder case was fleeting, such "flash activism" helps sustain the democratic fabric of civil society.[48] And yet, it is precisely the real-life activism that *RDB* inspired that ought to give us pause as we assess the implications of

reimagining history in (and as) sound. If, on the one hand, the film provoked middle class youth to protest the corruption of the judicial system, on the other, it emboldened upper-caste students in elite engineering, management, and medical schools to form a group called Youth for Equality, which

“fought a concerted and pitched campaign against reservations [for socially and educationally disadvantaged groups] in the name of preserving ‘merit.’”[49]

Such prejudiced iterations of the “*RDB* effect” and the virulence of the Hindu right’s revisionist narratives about Indian culture and history remind us of the dangers of a relativistic notion of history, one that gives credence to any and all stories about the past.

What keeps *RDB* from simply being a dangerous excuse for such bad-faith and ideological revisionism is that the film’s deejay aesthetic keeps its constructed nature always in the forefront. The remix never disavows its status as a creation; it is not a “found” object but a piece crafted out of found parts. While it acknowledges the creativity implicit in historiography, it does not suggest that “anything goes.” Nor does it insist that its telling is the true and authentic version of the past, a claim fundamental to the Hindu right’s revisionist agenda. The deejay aesthetic’s emphasis on product and process—that is, on the *fact* of the remix and on the *craft* of sampling, mixing, and editing—foregrounds a tenet that scholars of history have grappled with at least since the “linguistic turn” of the 1960s and 70s. As Gabrielle Spiegel put it in her Presidential Address to the 2009 American Historical Association convention,

“No longer a ‘given’ of the past that offers itself to the historian’s gaze, the [historical] referent is something constantly re-created in the recurring movement between past and present, hence ever-changing as that relationship itself is modified *in* the present.”[50]

To argue that history is narrative is not to advocate a complete turn to fiction. It is, instead, a call to recognize one’s place not just in history, but in the creation of that which comes to be seen and heard as the past. This is *RDB*’s most useful historical lesson and it is this that has long gone unheard.

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Notes

1. My heartfelt thanks to my writing group buddies Aswin Punathambekar, Greg Schneider-Bateman, and Megan Ankerson for reading multiple drafts of this work and helping me find my argument. I am also grateful to the editors and anonymous reviewer(s) of *Jump Cut*. Their generous and detailed feedback has made this a much stronger essay. [[return to page 1](#)]

2. The term Partition refers to the division of British India into the independent states of India and Pakistan in 1947. Bishnupriya Ghosh analyzes films like *Jodhaa Akbar* alongside novels by Tariq Ali and Salman Rushdie in her article “Once There Was Cosmopolitanism: Enchanted Pasts as Global History in the Contemporary Novel,” *Ariel* 42, no. 1 (2011), 11-33.

3. I place the term “historical” in quotation marks here because not all Hindi films that concerned themselves with the past fall neatly into this cinematic genre. As the titles listed earlier indicate, a number of these films were biopics based on actual historical figures; others are better described as fictional period dramas. Still others, like *RDB* (2006) and *Amu* (Shonali Bose, 2005), were more explicit about revisiting the past from the vantage point of the present. (Both films foreground the constructedness of the past by rendering it as a film-within-the-film or as fractured memories.)

It is also worth noting here that while the independence movement was and is the focus of many a historical film, other moments of political and social conflict also get referenced. For instance, *Hazaaron Khwaahishein Aisi/A Thousand Such Desires* (Sudhir Mishra, 2003) is about the divergent paths taken by three friends who were student activists in the late 1960s and 1970s; one of the characters remains involved in the Naxalite movement, the guerrilla struggle of Maoist tribals and lower-caste landless peasants against elite landowners and the Indian state that continues to this day. *Amu*, meanwhile, highlights the violence against Sikhs in the early 1980s (a matter on which *RDB* is oddly silent, despite its protagonist DJ being a Sikh man). Hindi cinema has maintained its interest in historical narratives, as is evident in more recent films like *Khelein Hum Jee Jaan Se/We Play With All Our Heart* (Ashutosh Gowariker, 2010) and *Chittagong* (Bedabrata Pain, 2012).

4. The Indian Constitution took effect on January 26, 1950.

5. Meghana Dilip, “Rang De Basanti – Consumption, Citizenship, and the Public Sphere” (master’s thesis, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 2008): 30-39. As will become plain below, *RDB*’s explicit appeal to youth is encoded in its plot: the film focuses on a group of close college friends and charts their

transformation into adults. This trajectory is key to several acclaimed films, such as *Dil Chahtha Hai/What the Heart Desires* (Farhan Akhtar, 2001), *Hazaaron Khwaahishein Aisi* (2003), *Rock On!!* (Abhishek Kapoor, 2008), and *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara/You Only Live Once* (Zoya Akhtar, 2011). A number of these youth films combine a standard coming-of-age story with another recurrent trope in Bombay cinema, the concept of *dosti* or undying male friendship. In contemporary takes on youthful bonding, the focus is not on a male dyad (with a woman forming the third term in the love triangle) but on a *group* of young men.

Often, women are a part of the group but their stories typically fall away—this is certainly the case with *RDB*, which pushes the two women, Sonia and Sue, to the sidelines in the second half. Romantic comedies that use the *bildungsroman* arc offer a sharp contrast, keeping women at the center of the narrative. *Salaam Namaste/Hello Good day* (Siddharth Anand, 2005), *Jaane Tu Ya Jaane Na/Whether You Know It or Not* (Abbas Tyrewala, 2008), and *Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani/This Youth is Crazy* (Ayan Mukerji, 2013) are good examples of what one might call a “coming-of-age romance.” However, it is the rare film that narrates the transformation of a group of young women friends: *Page 3* (Madhur Bhandarkar, 2005) comes to mind here.

While a full discussion of the gender politics of *RDB* falls outside the scope of the current article, I take up the question of the initial boyishness of our protagonists with regard to the film’s conception of history later in this essay, in the section entitled “Other Times, Other Places.” For now, let me add that the combination of the themes of youth culture and political protest that made *RDB* such a success is also taken up in later films such as *Aarakshan/Reservation* (Prakash Jha, 2011) and *Satyagraha/Protest* (Prakash Jha, 2013). I am grateful to the reviewer(s) for reminding me of the connections between *RDB* and several of the aforementioned films and film genres.

6. Namrata Joshi, “My Yellow Icon,” *Outlook*, February 20, 2006.
<http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?230266>.

7. Ibid., note Ranjini Mazumdar’s critique of the film. See also Neelam Srivastava, “Bollywood as National(ist) Cinema,” *Third Text* 23, no. 6 (November 2009), 706, and M. K. Raghavendra, “Globalism and Indian Nationalism,” *EPW*, April 22, 2006, 1503-1505.

8. Here I draw on Ranajit Guha’s critique of the Hegelian concept of “World-history” (*Weltgeschichte*) and his discussion of how the Indian notion of *itihasa*, grounded in Hindu religiosity and mythology, entails an alternative conceptualization of time. See Ranajit Guha, *History at the Limit of World-History* (NY: Columbia University Press, 2002).

9. On the “disappearance” of the song-dance sequence in contemporary Hindi cinema, see Tejaswini Ganti, *Bollywood: A Guidebook to Popular Hindi Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2013) and “No Longer a Frivolous Singing and Dancing Nation of Movie-Makers: The Hindi Film Industry and its Quest for Global Distinction,” *Visual Anthropology* 25 (2012): 340-365; Ian Garwood, “The Songless Bollywood Film,” *South Asian Popular Culture* 4, no. 2

(October 2006): 169-183; and Sangita Gopal, *Conjugations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). See Garwood (especially pp. 170-173) for a succinct summary of the industrial changes that have allowed for the emergence of the “songless” Bollywood film in the past ten years.

In her chapter “When the Music’s Over: A History of the Romantic Duet,” Gopal provides a longer and very illuminating history of the same phenomenon, but links it to the constitution and re-constitution of coupledness in Hindi cinema at different historical moments (see chapter one of Gopal, *Conjugations*, pp. 23-59). Ganti’s interviews with contemporary filmmakers indicate that whereas in the past the omission of songs in a film was construed as a deliberate anti-commercial stance, one that sought to limit the film’s audience to the discerning elite (Ganti, *Bollywood*, 79), the same choice is today seen as a way to reach a global (read Western) audience (Ganti, “No Longer,” 349-357). Lip-synched songs are also seen to be at odds with New Bollywood cinema’s emphasis on realism.

Still, the functions that song-dance sequences once performed remain crucial. Those are now accomplished by other narrative strategies, such that even songless films “contain the traces of the form they are ostensibly eschewing” (Garwood, “Songless Bollywood Film,” 173).

10. *Rai* is an Algerian folk musical genre that first gained prominence in the 1930s as the music of the urban poor and disenfranchised. Over time the genre has absorbed a wide range of musical influences from traditional Bedouin music to Moroccan and Egyptian wedding songs to western rock. The genre still retains its strong associations with youth and social protest, with the (usually) male singer or *cheb* voicing concerns of the “common man.”

Bhangra, too, is a vibrant, danceable musical style that has its roots in folk music. Traditionally associated with the spring harvest festival in Punjab (in the Indian subcontinent), bhangra was infused with rap, reggae, and hip-hop elements by British Asian deejays in the 1980s. It circulated widely in Britain and India as dance/clubbing music and also became a staple in mainstream Hindi cinema.

11. Hindutva is the religious and cultural nationalist philosophy embraced by several right-wing political parties in India. Pride in Hindu culture and identity is accompanied, in this worldview, with the belief that Indian culture is fundamentally Hindu and that the state and civil institutions must reflect Hindu values (however narrowly defined).

12. As feminist scholars have amply documented, the marginalization of women (as agents) in discourses of nation and nationalism is common the world over. In (post)colonial literature about the Indian subcontinent, the white woman often plays the role of a sympathetic outsider. While mainstream Hindi cinema has historically vilified foreignness and whiteness (in the post-independence period, for example, vampires were portrayed as overly Westernized and thus un-Indian), more recently the white woman has emerged as a benevolent nationalist muse. While she is positioned as a lover of India and of the Indian hero, inter-racial romance is typically interrupted in these films.

Shyam Benegal's film *Junoon/Obsession* (1978), an adaptation of Ruskin Bond's novella *Flight of the Pigeons*, is an early example of a film starring the "good" white woman. *Lagaan* (2001) famously revived this motif in contemporary Hindi cinema. *RDB* developed it further by positioning Sue and her filmmaking project as the catalyst for DJ and his friends' nationalist "awakening" and by allowing more of a romance to develop between the British woman and the Indian man than in previous films. For a comparative analysis of the role of the white woman in *Lagaan* and *RDB*, see Jann Dark, "Crossing the Pale," *Transforming Cultures eJournal* 3, no. 1 (February 2008): 124-144.

13. Srivastava, "Bollywood as National(ist) Cinema," 713.

14. The group's title is only visible in one shot of the film, in a sequence called "Lalkaar" (Clarion Call) that I discuss below. This sequence is a reference to the historic 1928 meeting at Ferozshah Kotla in Delhi, when members of the aforementioned Hindustan Republican Association and other radical groups converged to organize themselves into a new organization named HSRA. All of the revolutionaries referenced in *RDB* were members of this socialist organization.

15. DJ's mother is the only person to address him as Daljeet. That said, DJ's Punjabi moorings are ever present in his accent and turns of phrase, and in the bhangra of the title song. [[return to page 2](#)]

16. "Khaliwali" was itself a version of a highly popular qawwali "Le Gayi Dil Mera Manchali" by the renowned qawwal Jani Babu (Syed Jan Muhammad) released on a 1992 album. This detail is important because it draws attention to the phenomenal growth of cassette culture and non-filmi music in the 80s and 90s. While the burgeoning of other kinds of popular music was initially framed in terms of the challenge those genres posed to the hegemony of film music (consider Peter Manuel's *Cassette Culture*), more recently scholars have begun to acknowledge the ways in which the film, television, and music industries fed off and sustained one another. See, for instance, Shanti Kumar, "Innovation, Imitation, and Hybridity in Indian Television," in *Thinking Outside the Box: A Contemporary Television Genre Reader*, eds. Gary R. Edgerton and Brian G. Rose (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 314-335.

17. *Videocon Flashback* re-introduced Hindi film songs from the 1960s and 70s to young people, grabbing viewers' attention through the gimmicks, mimicry, and catchy dialogues of the show's VJ, comedian Javed Jafferi. *Ibid.*, 326.

18. Peter Manuel, *Cassette Culture: Popular Music and Technology in North India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

19. In contemporary India as elsewhere in the world, cassette tapes have been replaced by newer technologies such as CDs and mp3 players. Thus, *RDB*'s fetishization of the tape deck might strike one as outmoded, or a sign of hipster nostalgia for outdated technology. I suggest that what saves the

cassette player from being too quaint or kitschy is that it is one of many different technological apparatuses that together articulate *RDB*'s investment in the entwined histories of music and nation in India.

20. David Lelyveld, "Upon the Subdominant: Administering Music on All-India Radio," in *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in A South Asian World*, ed. Carol A. Breckenridge (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 59.

21. Manisha Basu, "*Rang De Basanti*: The Solvent Brown and Other Imperial Colors," in *Bollywood and Globalization: Indian Popular Cinema, Nation, and Diaspora*, eds. Rini Bhattacharya Mehta and Rajeshwari V. Pandharipande (London: Anthem Press, 2010), 108-109.

22. In the Indian context, the term "liberalization" refers to the "opening up" of the economy to private and foreign investment via the easing of fiscal and tax regulations. The process formally began in 1991 with the sweeping reforms introduced by then-Finance Minister Manmohan Singh. As several scholars have noted, these economic changes had a profound impact on the media landscape.

23. Basu, "Solvent Brown," 109.

24. While Rahul is introduced early on as a pathetic figure, he is clearly significant for his name recalls the music director Rahul Dev Burman, whom he references on his music program.

25. One of R. D. Burman's earliest hits was "Aao Twist Karein" ("Come, Let's Do the Twist") from *Bhoot Bangla/Haunted Bungalow* (Mehmood, 1965). This was followed by his hugely successful soundtrack for *Teesri Manzil/Third Floor* (Vijay Anand, 1966).

26. Aswin Punathambekar, "Ameen Sayani and Radio Ceylon: Notes Towards a History of Broadcasting and Bombay Cinema," *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 1, no. 2 (July 2010), 189.

27. Prasoon Joshi rewrote the lyrics of Bismil's poem for *RDB*.

28. Subaltern studies historians have used the concept of the fragment to challenge totalizing narratives and the historiography of the nation. See, in particular, Gyanendra Pandey, "In Defense of the Fragment: Writing About Hindu-Muslim Riots in India Today," *Representations* 37 (Winter 1992), 27-55.

29. McKinley's informal account also communicates his memories of his experience (it is written in the past tense), expresses his deep disillusionment with official British policies, and focuses on characters devalued by both official nationalist historiography in India and Sue's bosses, who would rather make films about Gandhi or even the Algerian feminist writer and filmmaker Assia Djebar. All of this gives his diary a distinctly counter-hegemonic status. Nonetheless, the emphasis on the written and the visual persists in the diary entry, diminishing its ability to challenge an empiricist understanding of

history. I argue that the oral, performative, and narrative concept of *itihasa* that *RDB* foregrounds offers a more thoroughgoing challenge to the notion of history.

30. I do not mean to suggest that film is *solely* focused on eyes and the visual at the start. The image of kohl-lined eyes is followed by a strong aural representation of Hinduism. The camera appears to pan right to the adjacent cell, where a man cleanses himself as if performing a sacred ritual. As he pours water over his head, he chants a Sanskrit *shloka* (Hindu chant). His clear, crisp notes ring through the jail as our gaze (aligned with McKinley's as jailor) travels to the next two cells, which also include male prisoners. We recognize in retrospect that the first shot was that of a man lining his eyes with kohl, and that was visual shorthand for his Muslim identity. The juxtaposition of the visual and the aural (that is, the Muslim prisoner's kohl-lined eyes and the Hindu prisoner's chanting) introduces the theme of Hindu-Muslim unity that runs through *RDB*. Similarly, as I discuss below, the title credit sequence uses a "deejay aesthetic" in the editing of the images and in the soundtrack. All this to say that mine is not an argument that disconnects the aural and the visual. My point, rather, is that *RDB* uses shifts in the voice-overs to dissuade us from prioritizing the written and the visual in thinking about history.

31. It was here that Ajay had proposed to Sonia surrounded by his friends, and where the group had decided to avenge Ajay's untimely death.

32. The idea that "words" live on is also conveyed by the repeated reference to Ram Prasad Bismil's poem "Sarfaroshi ki Tamanna" and the way Karan echoes (almost verbatim) his late friend Ajay's convictions about patriotic service.

33. This point about aurality is underlined via the non-visual form in which it is communicated, the voice-over. There are two points of further interest here: first, Sue's voice-over emphasizes the *affective* dimension of the past as it persists into the present. The laughter, the happiness in her friends' voices, is what floats back into her ears. Second, it is notable that the women are the ones who are the auditors of the past. Thus, the shift from a visual to an aural conception of the past is accompanied by a shift in the gender of the person making sense of "that laughter, those words, those memories." One might argue that this ending not only tempers the masculinist ethos of the rest of the film, but also carves out an important place for women in the crafting and telling of history.

34. Guha, *History at the Limit of World-History*, 50-51.

35. *Ibid.*, 61.

36. *Ibid.*, 54.

37. *Ibid.*, 62. I first came to appreciate the importance of different "tellings" that compose *itihasa* upon reading A. K. Ramanujan's wonderful essay "Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation," in *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed.

Paula Richman (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), 22-49.

38. Guha, *History at the Limit of World-History*, 52.

39. See chapter 3, "Translating Life-Worlds into Labor and History," in Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 72, 78.

40. Anderson's claim in *The Spectre of Comparisons* is that "everyday practices, rooted in industrial material civilization . . . have displaced the cosmos to make way for the world." See Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (London: Verso, 1998), 29.

41. Ashis Nandy, "History's Forgotten Doubles," in "World Historians and Their Critics," special issue, *History and Theory* 34, no. 2 (May 1995), 50.

42. Alexander Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 73.

43. In the Director's Commentary track of the DVD, Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra emphasizes the importance of aesthetic construction and the creativity of the editor P.S. Bharati in making the credit sequence work. He says:

"This particular title sequence we shot at various [camera and shutter] speeds and then brought it back to normal. It kinda stretched reality and brought it back to look real. I must say Bharati had a tough job on her hand trying to make sense of what we'd shot because everything was so non-linear, so unconnected. It was an editor's dream and an editor's nightmare." [[return to page 3](#)]

44. This pacifist reference may seem startling for *RDB* lionizes violent activism in the face of state violence. But, I would argue, this accommodation of contradiction and difference is a hallmark of the deejay aesthetic.

45. For the Fanonian resonances in *RDB* and a comparative analysis of *RDB* and Gillo Pontecorvo's famous film about the Algerian War of Independence *Battle of Algiers* (1966), see Srivastava, "Bollywood as National(ist) Cinema," 76.

46. Corey Creekmur, "Bombay Boys: Dissolving the Male Child in Popular Hindi Cinema," in *Where the Boys Are: Cinemas of Masculinity and Youth*, eds. Murray Pomerance and Frances Gateward (Wayne State Press: Detroit, 2005): 350-376. Creekmur argues that films open with a segment that introduces the protagonist as a child; shortly thereafter we see the same character as an adult. The swift transitions—often in the form of a dissolve, where images of past and present overlap briefly—ensure the coherence of the character despite the use of different bodies (i.e., different actors) for the same character. Maturation dissolves partially smooth the rupture in time and space as the narrative leaps forward to the present. They also reinforce the

idea that the character is fundamentally unchanged: the pain and loss of childhood continues to drive the adult hero's actions; there is little in the way of "character development" (353). This technique was largely dropped by the time we get to 1990s Shahrukh Khan films, where we get an adult hero who is "perpetually childish" (370).

47. Sudhanva Deshpande, "The Consumable Hero of Globalized India," in *Bollywood: Popular Indian Cinema through a Transnational Lens*, eds. Raminder Kaur and Ajay Sinha (New Delhi; Thousand Oaks; London: Sage, 2005): 186-203.

48. Ritesh Mehta, "Flash Activism: How a Bollywood Film Catalyzed Civic Justice Toward a Murder Trial," in "Transformative Works and Fan Activism," edited by Henry Jenkins and Sangita Shresthova, special issue, *Transformative Works and Culture*, no. 10 (2012).

[Doi:10.3983/twc.2012.0345](https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2012.0345). One of the most famous instances of the "RDB effect" was the mobilization against the initial acquittal of Manu Sharma, the son of a prominent politician, despite clear evidence that he murdered model Jessica Lall. Public dissent took the form of widely circulated (digital) petitions, rallies, and candlelight vigils, prompting comparisons to the protest scenes in *RDB*. While the murder had occurred in 1999, the acquittal decision came seven years later, in February 2006, barely a month after *RDB*'s release. The protest that bore the most resemblance to the film was the one organized by the weekly magazine *Tehelka* at Delhi's famous India Gate; this memorial is the site of the peaceful protest that DJ and his friends stage in *RDB* to honor their friend Ajay. The Jessica Lall mobilization prompted a review of the case, which eventually led to a guilty verdict that was upheld by the Supreme Court in 2010. Bollywood's entwinement with the case continued in the form of the film *No One Killed Jessica* (Raj Kumar Gupta, 2011), which was also a critical and commercial success. The title of the film references the headline that ran in the daily *Times of India* the day after the acquittal; the film poster declared that the "case [would be] reopen[ed] 7th January 2011."

49. Nandini Chandra, "Young Protest: The Idea of Merit in Commercial Hindi Cinema," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 30, no. 1 (2010): 119. Other critics have also pointed out that the film's suggestion that corruption is the only or the most important problem facing the country is itself reflective of its privileged point of view and address. See, for instance, Srivastava, "Bollywood as National(ist) Cinema" and M. K. Raghavendra, "Globalism and Indian Nationalism."

50. Gabrielle Spiegel, "The Task of the Historian" (Presidential address, 123rd annual meeting of American Historical Association, New York, NY, January 2-5, 2009). Emphasis in original.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Even the Rain recreates fifteenth-century Spanish colonialism so as to comment on contemporary multinational capital's neocolonialism.



Within *Even the Rain*'s historical network narrative, the character Daniel serves to link present and past indigenous resistance movements.



Babel's network narrative emphasizes spatial and accidental connections: the exchange of a gun connects these brothers in rural Morocco to characters in the United States, Mexico, and Japan.

Cinema and neoliberalism: network form and the politics of connection in Icíar Bollaín's *Even the Rain*

by [Shakti Jaising](#)

"The information that Columbus wanted most was: Where is the gold? ... Like other states of the modern world, Spain sought gold, which was becoming the new mark of wealth, more useful than land because it could buy anything" (2).

—Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present*

"[I]n September 1999 [Bechtel] signed a 214-page agreement with Bolivian officials....The contract gave Bechtel and its co-investors control of the city's water company for forty years and guaranteed them an average profit of 16 percent for each one of those years, to be financed by the families of Cochabamba" (16).

—Jim Shultz, "The Cochabamba Water Revolt and its Aftermath"

Even the Rain (*También la lluvia*, 2010) tells the story of a Spanish film crew shooting a period piece about Columbus in the midst of an uprising against water privatization in Cochabamba, Bolivia. Directed by Icíar Bollaín, the film re-creates the 2000 Cochabamba protests that challenged the take over of local water supply by U.S. multinational Bechtel, one of the world's largest corporations. As the film reveals, the so-called "Water War" was triggered by Bechtel's raising of water prices beyond what Bolivia's low-income and indigenous populations could afford.[1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] By paralleling the story of a contemporary uprising with that of indigenous resistance against the conquistadors during the early days of Spanish colonialism, Bollaín's film invites us to see multinational corporations and the governments that enable them as perpetrating a form of neo-colonialist violence that disproportionately affects economically deprived and historically marginalized populations.

This paper will analyze how *Even the Rain* juxtaposes past and present by drawing on but ultimately subverting the conventions of the "network narrative," a form that since the 1990s has risen in prominence in conjunction with network science and theory. Alexandro Gonzales Iñárritu's 2006 film, *Babel*, exemplifies the contemporary network narrative and its basis in what David Bordwell calls "attenuated links"



In *Babel* a U.S. couple traveling in Morocco leaves their children in the care of this Mexican nanny. The nanny and children find themselves stranded on the U.S.-Mexico border.



The final shot of *Babel*: in Tokyo, a man comforts his naked teenage daughter. His gift to a Moroccan tourist guide set off a chain reaction that reverberates across three continents.

between multiple protagonists and plotlines (*Hollywood* 99). Interweaving episodes taking place in Morocco, the United States, Mexico, and Japan, *Babel* reveals how the circulation of a random object across these diverse locations connects characters that are otherwise strangers to one another. Whereas the network form has been used largely— as in the case of *Babel*— to suggest accidental connections between people and places, *Even the Rain* emphasizes instead the histories and longstanding political structures that shape human relations within the contemporary world system. In the process, Bollaín’s film counters what Patrick Jagoda calls the “the spatial bias of network science”—by prompting viewers to think “temporally and historically” about global interconnection rather than primarily in terms of space and geography (74).[2]

David Harvey’s account of a late twentieth-century culture of postmodernity is helpful for understanding the “spatial bias” of network science as well as the contemporary network narrative. According to Harvey,

“[T]he history of capitalism has been characterized by ‘speed-up’ in the pace of life, while so overcoming spatial barriers that the world sometimes seems to collapse inwards upon us.... [A]s the time horizons shorten to the point where the present is all there is... we have to learn how to cope with an overwhelming sense of *compression* of our spatial and temporal worlds.” (*Condition* 240)

Harvey uses the term “time-space compression” to refer to the effects of speed-up and expansion of capitalist processes. Postmodern art, he argues, gives expression to a heightened experience of time-space compression in the late twentieth century. By depicting flat or “depthless” surfaces that are placed in relation to one another via strategies of collage, postmodern art conveys a perceived “loss of temporality” (Harvey, *Condition* 58) and a sense that “the present is all there is” (*Condition* 240).

Contemporary network narratives’ reliance on juxtaposition resonates with a postmodern aesthetics of collage. Although network narratives link their various parts whereas postmodernism “swims, even wallows, in the fragmentary and the chaotic currents of change” (Harvey, *Condition* 44), linkages in both cases are depicted as superficial and contingent rather than based in historical causality. For the most part, like postmodern art, network narratives avoid historical explanations of cause and effect in preference for random and accidental connections in the present, thereby mirroring rather than questioning capitalism’s shaping of our temporal and spatial imaginations.

By alternating between past and present—and connecting characters across space as well as time—*Even the Rain* resembles the contemporary network narrative but transforms it in a radical way. Although market pressures limit to some extent its political critique, Bollaín’s film nevertheless counters a simplistic logic of interconnectedness that tends to be used within contemporary globalization discourse to celebrate the “flexibility” and mobility of private capital across space while obscuring its egregious histories and ongoing practices of exploitation.[3]

Harvey has argued that with the global turn to neoliberalism, or an extremist ideology of free market capitalism,

“Deregulation, privatization, and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision have been all too common”
(*Neoliberalism* 3)[4]

Over the last four decades corporate power, its think tanks, as well as transnational institutions like the International Monetary Fund and World Bank have pressured governments of poor countries like Bolivia to privatize even basic resources such as water supply[5]. Within a climate in which privatization is promoted globally as an indomitable logic, *Even the Rain*’s alternative network narrative highlights the longstanding injustices of private and multinational capital and provides us with an example of successful popular resistance against the political regimes that prop it up.

Network narratives in contemporary cinema and the case of *Babel*

The form of the network narrative is by no means new.[6] Wesley Beal and Stacy Lavin point out that “the network narrative genre and the widespread ideology of networks that we recognize today are not the exclusive domain of a digitized society, but they are also part of a trajectory that reaches back into the earliest decades of the twentieth century.” Caroline Levine goes back further in time and argues that Charles Dickens’

“*Bleak House* relies heavily on the form of the network in a way that paves the way for recent narratives about political, technological, economic, and social networks, including such films as *Traffic*, *Syriana*, and *Babel*.”

In fact, “the expansive length of *Bleak House*,” according to Levine, “makes the nineteenth-century novel more successful than any recent film at capturing the complexity and power of networked social experience” (517). In her view, Dickens’ novel “structures the unfolding of its plot around multiple conflicting and competing webs of interconnection.” Moreover,

“Characters are not centered subjects but points of social intersection. By hanging his novel not on individuals but on networks, Dickens is able to undermine the usual novelistic reliance on individual agency” (519).

Levine thus sees in Dickens’ novel potential for the network form to be “ideologically unsettling” (520) because it shows how individuals play “crucial roles in social, economic, and institutional networks” (519).[7]

Like *Bleak House*, contemporary “hyperlink” cinema—as described by Patrick Jagoda—is based on “cutting across numerous locations, institutions, and characters in order to explore a complex social field.”[8] Jagoda argues, “This form is especially effective at rendering networks that interlink cultural, economic, and political nodes” (75). Describing the origins of the cinematic network narrative, David Bordwell goes back to the 1932 Hollywood film, *Grand Hotel*, directed by Edmund Goulding, that “laid down some basic conventions: in one locale, a star-packed cast portrays characters linked by contingency” (*Hollywood* 94). He observes, however, “Between *Grand Hotel* and the early 1990s, there don’t seem to be a lot of network films,” and that “the current vogue can be dated to a batch of films from 1993-1994” including Robert Altman’s *Short Cuts* (1993), Michael Haneke’s *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance* (1994), Atom Egoyan’s *Exotica* (1994), Wong Kar Wai’s *Chungking Express*

(1994), and Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994) (*Poetics* 194).

Bordwell proposes that while it has a long history in the novel, the form's recent popularity is attributable to market forces as well as the proliferation of network theory. As "Big stars didn't have to commit many days to an ensemble vehicle, and they didn't demand their usual high salaries" (Bordwell 197), directors realized the practical appeal of working on network films. Simultaneously, the rise of network science in the final decades of the twentieth century brought the language and logic of networks into popular consciousness:

"Scientists began to explore the nature of small worlds and the connectedness of apparently random phenomena, from cricket-chirping rhythms to the organization of the Internet. As chaos theory came to be called the 'butterfly effect,' popular culture conceived network theory as 'six degrees of separation.'"

(*Hollywood* 100)

Bordwell suggests,

"After 1990 the phrase [six degrees of separation] passed into common use, thanks largely to John Guare's play and the Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon game, and it seems to have inspired art works both high and low" (*Hollywood* 99).

Indeed, the network form featured in not only independent or art house films but also advertisements, music videos, and other sites of popular culture. For example, a 1992 music video for the R.E.M. song "Everybody Hurts" deploys strategies reminiscent of the opening sequence of Wim Wenders' critically acclaimed film, *Wings of Desire* (1987). If in Wenders' film a roving camera and internal diegetic sound link the experiences of a diverse group of anonymous urban characters, then in the R.E. M. music video the camera pans in slow motion across cars stuck in a traffic jam as the subtitles transcribe—mostly in English and occasionally in Spanish—the thoughts of drivers and passengers. In the end, the diverse characters leave their stagnant cars and start walking away, a move initiated by the lead singer who ascends on car roofs—like the omniscient invisible angel of *Wings of Desire*—and sings of shared hurt and pain. The 1999 film *Magnolia* further exemplifies the use of network form across music videos and art house films—as well as the embedding of music video aesthetics in film. In one memorable scene, camera movements are timed to music as the film cuts between its various characters singing an Aimee Mann song playing in the soundtrack. Like "Everybody Hurts," the Aimee Mann song, "Wise Up," is about shared pain. Thus like most network films *Magnolia* explores the coincidences that link multiple protagonists whose "projects are largely decoupled from one another, or only contingently linked" (Bordwell, *Poetics* 192).

In recent years, the network narrative has expanded to connecting protagonists and projects across national boundaries. Mexican director Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Babel* (2006) exemplifies the global terrain of the contemporary network film as well as its potential for bringing together an ensemble cast of internationally renowned stars.

The film opens with a Moroccan man selling a rifle to a poor rural family. In subsequent scenes, the youngest member of this family unwittingly shoots at a female U.S. tourist (Cate Blanchett). From Morocco, the woman's husband (Brad Pitt) calls their Mexican nanny in California and



Babel exemplifies the contemporary network film's global terrain and ensemble cast. A U.S. tourist (Brad Pitt) searches for medical care after his wife (Cate Blanchett) is shot at in a remote Moroccan village.



The Morocco scenes seem grainier compared to the rest of the film. *Babel*'s cinematographer confirms they used 16mm for these scenes so that the place appears "almost dirty, because of what transpires there."



Brad Pitt's character (on right) chases in vain after the tourist bus that abandons him in a remote Moroccan village. Mise-en-scene choices reinforce conventions of representing Americans as vulnerable when they travel to poor nations.



Babel's filmmakers emphasized umber in the Morocco scenes.



The filmmakers chose to emphasize a primary red within the Mexico scenes.



The Moroccan brothers end up fighting one another when their father discovers they are responsible for shooting the U.S. tourist.



asks her to stay with their children while he procures medical help for his wife. The nanny agrees but ends up taking the children to her son's wedding in Mexico. Meanwhile, we are introduced to an adolescent deaf and mute girl in Tokyo who is exploring her sexuality for the first time. Unlike the other characters, we have greater subjective insight into her experience although we remain uncertain about her connection to the Morocco- and Mexico-based plots. Eventually, the children and Mexican nanny end up alone in the desert when the nanny's nephew (Gael García Bernal) abandons them, fearing trouble from U.S. authorities. Although they make it back to the United States, the nanny is deported because she is an undocumented worker. In Morocco, the village boy confesses to his accidental shooting of the tourist—though the police kill his brother in the process—while the U.S. couple is flown to an urban hospital. At the end we learn that we have been watching these seemingly parallel stories out of order; and that a Japanese tourist in Morocco had tipped his guide with a rifle that was later sold to the young shooter's family, triggering a chain reaction. It is this Japanese tourist's daughter who figures in the Tokyo episodes. Unknown to her, the girl's story is connected tangentially to lives in Morocco, Mexico, and the United States. As Bordwell puts it, "[N]etwork movies trade on ...remote and fragile connections" (*Poetics* 198), so that even "stray objects [can] hook people up" (*Poetics* 204).

Critics have drawn attention to the continuities between *Babel* and Iñárritu's earlier films, *Amores Perros* (2000) and *21 Grams* (2003) that were similarly premised on revealing hidden links between diverse characters and plots. In "Fictions of the Global" Rita Barnard points out that "Iñárritu's interest in this kind of plot arises, to judge from his interviews, from a sense that Hollywood's canned narrative forms have desensitized the filmgoing audience and made it impossible for people really to see the contemporary world." In response, Barnard proposes,

"While [Iñárritu] describes his films as experiments in breaking away from plot-driven cinema, we may view them not as attempts to abandon plot as such but as attempts to devise new and more cosmopolitan narrative forms: forms that might reshape our received notions of human interconnection, causality, temporality, social space, and so forth." (208)

Barnard sees *Babel* as well as David Mitchell's novel *Ghostwritten* (1999) as characterized by

"a new kind of plot, with new coordinates of time and space, that may serve as a corollary to the brave neo world of millennial capitalism and perhaps even provide the conceptual preconditions for a cosmopolitan society" (208).

The temporal non-simultaneity of the individual narratives in *Babel* is, for Barnard, evidence of how the film departs from Benedict Anderson's conception of the national novel and signals instead a new, more cosmopolitan, form:

"While one might assume that the three stories are connected by their temporal simultaneity, the ending reveals (such is the film's equivalent to a plot twist) that this interpretive assumption is false.... This twist seems to me extremely important: it retroactively disables or falsifies the "meanwhile" principle, which, in Anderson's view, holds together the national novel and provides its readers with a shared sense of

Crosscutting and a sound bridge take us from the brothers fighting in Morocco to a car horn punctuating chaotic wedding celebrations in Mexico. The Mexico and Morocco episodes highlight chaos and anarchy in contrast with the relatively calm, private worlds depicted in the U.S.- and Japan-based scenes.



The camera tilts up from a noisy car horn to the Mexican wedding festivities.



A gun is fired amidst the noisy wedding celebration.



We cut to the young Americans' frightened reaction. Despite its critique of U.S. insularity, *Babel* aligns us with the U.S. characters' vulnerability in Morocco and Mexico.

space and time.” (209)

Barnard argues that instead of the “meanwhile principle,”

“What enables us to connect the three stories and three social locales is ultimately an intense, overarching affect: a kind of globalization of compassion that arises from a profound sense of human isolation and physical vulnerability” (209).

David Bordwell is more measured in his appreciation of *Babel*. In his blog post on the film Bordwell writes,

“It would be worthwhile building a symptomatic interpretation of *Babel*. My hunch is that despite Iñárritu’s claim that the film is about family and personal communication, something else is going on. After all, the drama is fundamentally about how prosperous white people have to suffer because Asian, Mexican, and North African men have guns.”

Developing Bordwell’s brief symptomatic reading of *Babel* I would add that although the spaces in the film are linked, there is a distinct difference in how we are prompted to respond to the advanced capitalist contexts—United States and Japan—on the one hand, and the “developing” or “peripheral” nations—Morocco and Mexico—on the other.[9]

Barnard correctly points out,

“A sense of a vast and disjunct world is conveyed by the film’s very different mise-en-scènes, a difference underscored by the fact that three very different cinematic techniques are deployed (different lenses, different formats of film, etc)” (209).

I would add, however, that the different mise-en-scenes reinforce Hollywoodesque depictions of Morocco and Mexico as sites of danger and heighten a sense of white Americans’ vulnerability in this “vast and disjunct world.”

In an interview, cinematographer Rodrigo Prieto speaks of how Iñárritu wanted the film to seem unified and yet convey “different feels” for the diverse national contexts. The filmmakers wanted Morocco in particular “to feel different, almost dirty, because of what transpires there.” The Morocco episodes are therefore shot mostly with Super 16 mm film and appear grainier and bleached out compared to the rest of the movie. Even within these episodes, moreover, Prieto alternated between four different 16 mm film stocks to differentiate the Americans’ story from that of the rural Moroccan family.[10] On the whole, the Morocco episodes emphasize the vast desert landscape and the Americans’ isolation within it. The tension created by handheld camerawork further accentuates the sense that something is about to go wrong for the Americans.

Prieto also speaks of how the filmmakers chose red as the “one color to carry through all three stories.” However, owing in part to the different film stocks used, “it appears as umber in Morocco and as primary red in Mexico.” The emphasis on deep, primary reds in the staging of the Mexican wedding scenes highlights local color but also the frenetic quality of the celebrations, thereby building suspense about the U.S. children’s fates. Crosscutting, moreover, reinforces a sense of doom awaiting the U.S. children. In one instance, the film cuts from an intense scene of the Moroccan brothers fighting one another to the sound of a car horn noisily

punctuating the chaotic celebration in Mexico. Moments later, the nanny's nephew fires gunshots in the air to mark the occasion—much to the horror of the U.S. boy to whose perspective we cut.

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Babel's filmmakers wanted a "pink/magenta shade" to be dominant in the Japan scenes.



In contrast to the bleached out Morocco scenes and the intensely colored Mexico scenes, the mild pink/magenta shade prepares viewers to associate Tokyo with subjective interiority.



Babel muffles diegetic sounds of Tokyo street life to convey the deaf girl's subjective experience.

Cinematographer Prieto claims that they "looked for more of a pink/magenta shade" for the Japan-based episodes. In stark contrast to the mise-en-scene of the Mexican wedding, the muted colors of the Japan-based scenes prepare the viewer to expect subjective interiority. The viewer learns to see even chaotic Tokyo through a private lens—in part because of the film's strategy to muffle or override diegetic sound at key moments to reflect the deaf girl's experience of her world. Meanwhile, the brief scenes set in United States take place mostly indoors, within the white family's home, with the mise-en-scene calling little attention to the special qualities of the world being depicted.

On the whole, the Mexican and Moroccan contexts appear both exotic and dangerous, while the Japanese and U.S. episodes appear relatively private and domestic. The children as well as adults from a single white U.S. family find themselves in positions of vulnerability in Morocco and Mexico, and their points of view set the tone for much of the storytelling.

Speaking of late twentieth-century cultural expression David Harvey points out,

"A strong sense of 'the Other' is replaced...by a weak sense of 'the others.' The loose hanging together of divergent street cultures in the fragmented spaces of the contemporary city re-emphasizes the contingent and accidental aspects of this 'otherness' in daily life" (*Condition* 301).

In other words, a political and structural analysis of the subjugated "Other" is replaced by a notion of accidental otherness. Harvey suggests that within the context of postmodern culture, a historical view of power relations resulting from class struggle and imperialism is harder to articulate in the presence of a generalized, dehistoricized sense of the coexistence of human diversity. This "weak sense" of otherness also informs *Babel's* representation of a visibly "disjunct" world and makes the film liable—even if unwittingly—to reinforcing cultural stereotypes.

It is true that the viewer is made aware of the insularity of the adult Americans and their incapacity—precisely because of their privilege—to adapt to places like Morocco. The viewer is also exposed to the injustices of globalization as we watch the Mexican nanny suffer in a world in which borders between neighboring nations are policed to the detriment of poor migrants. And we notice how the unwitting act of a young boy in Morocco is immediately and without evidence deemed "terrorism" by the U.S. press and government, leading to the tragic death of the boy's brother.

Nevertheless, despite its critique of the myopic attitudes of U.S. citizens and their government, the film reinforces Hollywood conventions of representing white Americans in danger whenever they are outside the United States, especially when they are in poor nations. After being confronted with the precariousness of the white Americans' lives in Mexico and Morocco, the viewer returns to the relative calm of the prosperous, domestic spaces of California and Japan with almost a sense of relief.

However self-conscious it may be in showing that danger is produced in part by Americans' own perceptions and misunderstandings, *Babel* nevertheless reinforces popular depictions of spaces like Morocco and Mexico as being not



A nanny in California takes her employer's call from Morocco. This domestic scene with its relatively nondescript mise-en-scene stands in contrast to the exotic and dangerous Morocco of previous scenes.



In its credit sequence *Even the Rain* pays homage to Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*, which opens with a helicopter carrying a Christ statue over Rome. Here, the cross is a prop for a Spanish film about Columbus's arrival in the "New World."



Daniel emerges as a rebel in the opening scene. He later leads protests against water privatization and acts in Sebastian's film as Hatuey, leader of Indian resistance.



An image from Sebastian's film: Daniel, dressed as Hatuey, looks defiantly at Columbus.

just economically impoverished but also zones of anarchy. In this sense, the film contributes towards a mythification of zones of economic advancement and of "underdevelopment"—by maintaining through its visual style their stark separation. As in the case of colonialist and development discourse, however, the viewer fails to understand *how* it is that some places are economically less developed, or why it is that we live in a bifurcated world, or what histories might connect various parts of the world beyond mere accidental linkages.

Bordwell speaks of how network narratives "evoke poetic linkages. A film's mottos tend to be both 'me and you and everyone we know' and 'mind the gap'—gaps being the slender, precarious affinities that can suggest subterranean forces bringing fates together" (*Poetics* 198). Like *Syriana*—whose tagline is "Everything is connected"—*Babel* suggests that all its characters' stories are connected because of the gun that created a ripple effect in their lives. However, as with postmodern art, "highly simplified rhetorical propositions" (Harvey, *Condition* 351) take the place of engaging with character depth, especially in the case of the Moroccan and Mexican characters.

In what follows I will show how *Even the Rain* draws on but also departs from the contemporary network narrative's investment in exposing fragile connections between people and places. My analysis will focus on the manner in which Bollaín's film counters contemporary network narratives' "spatial bias" and generalized view of otherness, even as it also reflects constraints imposed by dominant conventions of storytelling.

Even the Rain and historical connection

According to John E Davidson,

"The celebration of the quincentennial of Columbus's 'discoveries'—and with it five hundred years of the 'New World Order'—heightened many ongoing debates about the roles of media and representation in the construction of colonial history" (101).

Scottish screenwriter Paul Laverty began writing *Even the Rain* at the end of the 1990s—shortly after the quincentennial and amidst the debates of which Davidson speaks.

Having previously written scripts for Ken Loach's films, [11] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] Laverty found inspiration for *Even the Rain* in radical historian Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*. He set out to compose a period piece based on Zinn's account of the resistance to Spanish colonialism launched by the Indians as well as humanitarian priests, Bartolomé de las Casas and Antonio de Montesinos. Laverty in fact began developing this script with Alejandro González Iñárritu; however, Iñárritu had to leave the project when he started work on another film (Dawson 44).[12] Meanwhile, Laverty found himself dissatisfied with the initial script and decided to change it. As he put it, "The historical story felt very distant—I wanted to make it more immediate" (Dawson 44). When years later he traveled to Bolivia with Iciar Bollaín, Laverty met those who had resisted water privatization and who showed him the seven kilometers of trenches they had dug to procure water for themselves, in defiance of multinational corporate control. Laverty says,

"[He] couldn't help but notice the parallels between the multinational corporations and Columbus. Once again the indigenous population are resisting with sticks and stones, and are being chased by dogs.[13] This time rather than gold and slavery, it's about water" (Dawson 44).



Even the Rain's opening shot reveals a busy Cochabamba side street. The film recreates the Water War that took place in the year 2000 between multinational Bechtel and the citizens of Bolivia.



We observe street life from the perspective of Sebastian, a Spaniard who has come to Bolivia to direct a movie about Columbus.



Whereas the scene begins with Sebastian's point of view, it ends with Daniel's.



Daniel's point of view reveals the Spanish filmmakers driving away from the audition. From the outset, *Even the Rain* generates ambiguity about how and with whom we should align our gaze.

The eventual script of *Even the Rain* signals continuities between the actions of the conquistadors and multinational corporations, thereby exposing brutalities of the colonial past as well as the neoliberal present.

Spanish director Icíar Bollaín's previous films dealt with cultural identity and gender relations in contemporary Spain. Film scholar Susan Martin-Márquez points out that in Bollaín's first two feature-length films, *Hola! ¿Estás sola?* (*Hi, Are You Alone?*) (1995) and *Flores de otro mundo* (*Flowers from Another World*) (1999), the "treatment of notions of home, of displacement, and of cultural difference emerges from the contemporary contexts of globalization rather than from the traumas of the post-Civil War period" (257).

Although *Even the Rain* is set outside Spain, the film interrogates contemporary Spanish identity in ways that resonate with Bollaín's previous work. We watch uncomfortably as the idealistic Spanish director, Sebastian (Gael García Bernal), and his pragmatic film producer, Costa (Luis Tosar), are forced during their time in Cochabamba to confront the persistent legacies of their nation's imperialist past. Whereas major stars of transnational Spanish cinema play the roles of Sebastian and Costa, Bollaín's film also depends on non-actors, including some of the actual protestors that Laverty interviewed as well as the Bolivian Juan Carlos Aduviri who plays the crucial part of Daniel/Hatuey.

At the start of *Even the Rain*, we learn that Costa cares primarily about how cheap it is to shoot in Bolivia. It does not matter to him that the film he is producing shows Columbus arriving in the Andes rather than in the Caribbean, or that indigenous Bolivians play the part of Tainos, or that Bolivian Quechua stands in for the Taino language. Although Sebastian is critical of Costa's thinking and better informed about Spain's colonial history, he nevertheless goes along with Costa's production plan. Moreover, like Costa, Sebastian fails to understand Daniel, an indigenous Bolivian who organizes protests against water privatization while simultaneously acting in the Spaniards' film as Hatuey, leader of Indian resistance against the conquistadors. Although Sebastian initially appears more humane, at the end of *Even the Rain*, it is Costa rather than Sebastian who is morally transformed by his encounters with Daniel.

Bordwell elaborates as one of the defining features of the cinematic network narrative:

"The film can reveal and anticipate connections by employing unrestricted narration, skipping back and forth among people and places" (*Poetics* 207).

Even the Rain deploys unrestricted narration to move back and forth between characters not only across scenes but also within a single scene, thereby generating ambiguity about the narrative point of view.

For instance, the film begins by oscillating between the perspectives of a few characters, chiefly Sebastian and Daniel. The opening tracking shot is from Sebastian's point of view, as he looks out from the safety of his moving vehicle at a dusty side street in Cochabamba. Midway through the scene we cut to a more neutral perspective when we watch Sebastian and Costa worm their way through a crowd of Bolivians gathered to audition for their film. Tension mounts when Costa decides to audition only a chosen few, and Daniel emerges as a rebel by inciting the others to not move until the filmmakers had given every one a chance. When Sebastian agrees to Daniel's demand, he appears momentarily to be the humane one in the crew. The very next instant, however, he appears crudely opportunistic, asking his assistant to film "that bastard [Daniel]...He's good." The following shot tracks closer toward Daniel and his daughter, as the crowd cheers on in the background. While Sebastian looks up at a helicopter carrying a massive cross that we gather is a prop for the film



During a script rehearsal, Anton—who plays Columbus in Sebastian’s film—starts improvising the conquistadors’ arrival in America.



A shot of these servers invites us to regard the Spanish actors from the perspective of ordinary Bolivians.



Medium shots in the latter half of the script-reading scene create ambiguity: have we entered the world of Sebastian’s film? Or are we still watching the actors rehearse in present-day Cochabamba?



Past and present converge when an aggressive Anton/Columbus makes the female server into a character for his scene improvisation.

shoot, *Even the Rain* cuts to a close up of Daniel.[14] The scene’s final shot is from Daniel’s perspective as he looks on at the filmmakers driving away from the dusty scene. Thus, whereas we followed Sebastian’s gaze at the scene’s beginning, by its end we watch him and his crew from the perspective of Daniel. The entry of non-diegetic music at the scene’s end further invites us to contemplate the departing foreigners from a critical distance.

The productive ambiguity generated by this opening scene drives much of the film, prompting the viewer to recognize the power differential that structures relations between the Spaniards and the Bolivians. As the film proceeds, ambiguity is used also to blur the line between past and present.

For instance, in a script-reading scene, the camera pans across a table full of Spanish actors as we hear one of them read stage directions describing Taino children’s faces on witnessing Columbus’s arrival in the New World. We hear that the children are hit by a strange smell as the bearded Spaniards disembark. Momentarily the viewer of *Even the Rain* begins to see the modern bearded Spaniards past whom the camera pans as the conquistadors of Sebastian’s film script. When the drunken Anton (Karra Elejalde), playing Christopher Columbus, bursts into his role, the camera follows his movements and lowers itself as he kneels. When the other actors join Anton/Columbus by kneeling with him for prayer the film cuts to two servers standing in attention beside the abundant food table.

As the scene continues, a handheld camera captures a close shot of Anton/Columbus deliberating with another actor. This shot, that seems to listen in on a private conversation between Columbus and the ship captain, momentarily gives us the illusion that we have entered the world of Sebastian and Costa’s film. Tension mounts as the actors approach the female server and Anton/Columbus grabs at her earring and asks her where he can find gold.[15] Her refusal to answer makes him raise his voice. Past and present seem to converge as the conquistadors, now Spanish actors, confront a native woman who becomes increasingly stoic in her response. After a tense moment of uncomfortable silence, Anton snaps out of his role—much to the relief and amusement of his crew—and apologizes to the server for the actors’ “selfishness.” The scene ends with a shot of the woman looking at the actors.

This final shot is a brief one. Nevertheless, like the earlier shots of the servers, it invites the viewer to “build inferences out of teases, hints, and gaps”—a trait that Bordwell sees as characteristic of network narratives, as well as mystery films (*Poetics*, 200). Throughout *Even the Rain*, gaps and ambiguity prompt the viewer to reflect on the historical basis of the relationship between the Spaniards and the Bolivians. Thus, like most network narratives, *Even the Rain* brings strangers together; but their connection is attributed not to accident but rather to colonial power and its legacies.

Bordwell suggests,

“In watching a network narrative ... we’re often coaxed to notice how characters are sharply similar or different from one another” (*Poetics* 211).

Even the Rain exemplifies this feature of the network narrative, for having established the film crew and its interactions with the locals, subsequent scenes are layered through a logic of parallelism and contrast.

As in most network narratives, the device of crosscutting enables exposition of these parallels and oppositions—but in the case of *Even the Rain* crosscutting moves the viewer not only across space but also time. As we increasingly alternate between the story of Columbus and the conquistadors—told through Sebastian’s film—and the story of the Cochabamba uprising, we are invited to



The server's stoic response creates discomfort, prompting us to notice how the legacies of colonial relations inform the present.

reflect on a host of parallels: between Columbus and the multinational corporations of today, between gold and water, and between the dispossessed indigenous populations of the past and present. The alternation between scenes with Daniel leading protests in the Water War and then playing the role of indigenous leader, Hatuey, in Sebastian's film reinforces historical linkages. But in addition to such linkages, the film emphasizes the contrast between the Bolivians' perspective on history and that of the Spanish film crew.

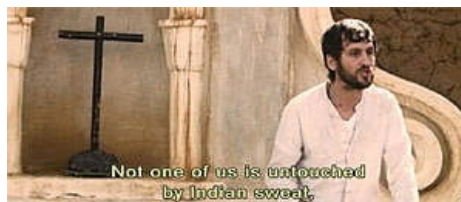
For instance, in one scene, a group of indigenous women challenges officials from the private water company who are breaking the lock to their collectively-owned well. When the women manage to prevail, *Even the Rain* cuts to Sebastian's crew rehearsing a scene that takes place in March 1511. As the actor who plays Montesinos gives a church sermon challenging the exploitation of Indians, *Even the Rain* cuts between his performance and shots of Bolivian construction workers looking on at the rehearsal. As we cut back and forth in this scene, the viewer is invited to wonder about the links between indigenous populations of the past and present—and about how the workers (and, perhaps, the women from the previous scene) might regard Sebastian's film that tells the story of colonial exploitation from the point of view of exceptional, humanitarian Spaniards.



A group of indigenous women resist the private water company's control over their community well.



Crosscutting moves us between present and past—between the women's protest to actors playing fifteenth-century Spaniards. Workers constructing the film set look on as Sebastian directs another rehearsal.



An actor performs Spanish priest Montesinos' humanitarian defense of Indian rights.



We cut to Bolivian construction workers watching Montesinos defend Indian humanity. Their gaze makes us wonder how indigenous Bolivians view the content of Sebastian's film.

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The scene's final shot shows Sebastian reflecting presumably on the "first voice of conscience against an empire." A sound bridge brings in Daniel's protest from the following scene, signaling the ongoing struggle against imperialism.



Daniel (seen through the lens of a documentarian's camera) speaks out against injustices perpetrated by the multinational water company.



Daniel addresses a gathering outside the water company's office. A protest sign combines the Quechua word for water, "yaku," with the Spanish word for "sell," "vende," suggesting the complexities of indigenous resistance against water privatization.

As the scene ends, Sebastian tells his actors that Montesinos was "the first voice of conscience against an empire." In the scene's final shot, Sebastian sits contemplatively in the film set. Momentarily, though, a sound bridge brings in Daniel's voice from the following scene proclaiming, "They sell our wells, our lakes... and even the rain that falls on our heads. By law." Daniel's voice briefly takes over as Sebastian rests. The sound bridge interrupts the story of the exceptional Spaniards that is the focus of Sebastian's film and returns our attention to the indigenous perspective. When we cut to the next scene, a fiery Daniel, microphone in hand, addresses a small crowd outside the private water company: "And who takes even the rain? A company whose owners are in London and California." Although Daniel speaks in Spanish, a protest sign around him reads "Yaku vende," where "yaku," the Quechua word for water, is paired with the Spanish, "vende." The protest sign calls attention to the longstanding struggle of indigenous Bolivians against imperialist forces—both within as well as beyond their nation.

In this manner, crosscutting in *Even the Rain* links the fates of indigenous populations in the past and present and also invites us to notice the contrast between the Spanish priests speaking on behalf of Tainos within the context of Sebastian's historical narrative and the Bolivian Indians representing their own interests in the present. *Even the Rain* thereby engages the viewer in a form of political analysis and reflection on how and from whose perspective history is told.

Although Sebastian and the Spanish film crew appreciate the oppressiveness of the colonial past, we realize increasingly that they resist recognizing its ongoing legacies and new modes of expression. However, past and present converge most painfully when the Spanish team films the conquistadors' crucifixion of Hatuey and other Indians.

The scene opens within the world of Sebastian's film—as we witness a heated argument between a Spanish commander and Bartolomé de Las Casas. The commander wants to make an example of the death of thirteen Indians, which Las Casas opposes. In several shots, Las Casas appears small compared to the commanders mounted on their horses, suggestive of his relative powerlessness. Once the Spaniards start burning the crosses, the camera closes in on the Indians, especially Hatuey who begins to shout in Quechua (that is made to stand in for Taino within the world of Sebastian's film): "I despise you. I despise your God. I despise your greed." When the other men at the stakes join in this chant, we move between Hatuey's impassioned face, wide shots of the ritual killing, cutaways to the Indians who have been made to watch, and shots of the Commanders and Las Casas who fail to comprehend the chant. As tension builds, all the Indians start shouting Hatuey's name in defiance of Spanish orders. The Commander is unable to subdue the crowd, and a weary Las Casas cries above the chanting, "Thanks to you, [Hatuey's name] will never be forgotten."

The next cut returns the viewer to the present—with Sebastian, on a raised



In a crucifixion scene for Sebastian's film, Daniel performs Hatuey's defiance of Spanish authority.



The other men at the stakes join Hatuey in a protest chant.



Even the Rain immerses us in the world of Sebastian's film, cutting between the men bound to the stakes, the conquistadors, and the Indians who are forced to watch.



A weary Bartolomé de Las Casas reminds the Spanish commanders that crucifixion would memorialize Hatuey.

platform, thanking the actors and announcing the end of the shoot. When we first survey the scene of the action from the filmmakers' raised perspective, smoke rises from where the crosses had been planted; but the area now appears less lush, more prosaic. We see patches of barren ground where in the diegesis of Sebastian's film we saw only dense foliage. The human figures appear smaller in the frame—and the viewer is reminded of the difference between cinematic construction and reality. But just when we begin to think that the horror of Sebastian's film is safely contained in the past, we see policemen arrest Daniel for his role in leading protests against water privatization. Non-diegetic music enters at this point, drowning out sounds from the scene as Daniel—in slow motion—is dragged away by the police.

The momentary slowing down of film speed allows the viewer to ponder the parallels between past and present, especially as Daniel remains dressed as Hatuey. When Daniel/Hatuey is brought to the police car, the film returns to normal speed, allowing us to notice the aggressiveness with which the police push him into the car despite opposition from a crowd that remains dressed in the indigenous costume worn for the film shoot. The crowd eventually topples the police car and manages to release Daniel. When the policemen threaten to shoot, Sebastian and Costa finally intervene. But the Spaniards are relatively ineffective as the crowd pushes the policemen to the ground and frees Daniel. The scene ends with Sebastian declaring to Costa, "It is like a dream. I can't believe it." The viewer, however, has been prompted all along to think of it as more than a dream—but rather as an uncanny repetition of the past, albeit with key differences. Unlike in the past, the Indians are not victims; on the contrary, they successfully manage to prevent Daniel from being arrested. Since Sebastian and Costa had previously made a deal with the police chief to return Daniel to custody following the film shoot, the viewer learns to question the Spaniards' ethics. The end of this scene shows Sebastian and Costa in a state of crisis and prompts the viewer to wonder about the extent to which they recognize their complicity in the historical violence directed against Daniel and his people.

Moral transformation and the limits of network form

Just at the point that the filmmakers appear irredeemably compromised, Costa is asked by Daniel's wife to help find their daughter, Belen, who goes missing during the government-imposed curfew.[16] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] Costa's willingness to do this marks the culmination of his slow transformation and results in his saving Belen's life. The centralization of the metropolitan character's development, especially in the film's final act, signals a crucial contradiction within *Even the Rain*'s attempt at historicizing the indigenous perspective.

In an interview, screenwriter Paul Laverty testifies to market pressure when he speaks of how the film might not have received funding if the indigenous character were at its center: " 'Obviously I would have loved to tell the story from the perspective of the Indian leader Daniel,' " states Laverty. " 'It's just we would never have been given the money by the financiers' " (Dawson 44).[17] If *Even the Rain* reveals how Costa's choices for Sebastian's film are in response to foreign investors' demands, then Laverty's comment suggests that money and finance influence his own



Immediately after the film shoot, Daniel is arrested for his role in leading protests against the multinational water company. Daniel's arrest, depicted in slow motion, prompts reflection on the continuities between past and present.



Since he remains dressed as Hatuey, Daniel's resistance recalls Hatuey's defiance of Spanish authority.



Costa and Sebastian intervene to prevent the officials from shooting. Beyond this, the Spaniards do little because of their deal with a police chief to return Daniel to custody.



creative decisions as well. In response to market pressures, Laverty makes Costa's transformation from a morally compromised to an ethical individual a structuring device within *Even the Rain*. In the process, however, *Even the Rain*'s historical network narrative is funneled during its final act into a linear format leading to relative closure.

Whereas the film cues us initially to believe that the socially and historically aware Sebastian would be its moral center, it gradually begins to invest in Costa. An early moment that cues us to notice Costa's internal process is when Daniel overhears a phone conversation in which Costa boasts to an U.S. producer about how cheap it is to hire extras in Bolivia: "two fucking dollars a day" can make them "feel like kings," announces Costa. Daniel later confronts Costa with "I know this story," implying his awareness of the continuities between Costa's behavior and the long history of exploitation of Indians like himself. This scene is crucial in triggering change in Costa as well as in establishing a vexed but ultimately reciprocal relationship between Costa and Daniel.

As the protests intensify, the contrast between the positions of the protesting Bolivians and elite film crew becomes increasingly stark—as does the gap between Daniel's and Costa's positions. One scene that highlights this gap is when the Spaniards meet with a local politician who has been supporting their film production, while around them the protests get louder and the police more violent. The politician complains to the filmmakers that, "Given their long history of exploitation, Indians' distrust is embedded in their genes. It is very difficult to reason with them, especially when they are illiterate." The politician's inability to see indigenous Bolivians as fully human is brought into relief when Sebastian tries to reason with him, asking him how someone who earns two dollars a day could pay a 300% increase in the price of water. The Bolivian official replies, "How curious. That's what I'm told you pay the extras." As Costa guiltily listens in on this conversation, *Even the Rain* suggests that the Spanish filmmakers' treatment of their extras is enabled by a history of state-sanctioned violence against poor and indigenous Bolivians. It is the longstanding exploitation of Bolivians that makes it possible for the Spanish filmmaking crew to get away with paying their extras so little.[18]

The scenes showing Daniel's resistance to Costa's attempts at appeasing him are crucial for shifting Costa's attitude towards Indians. In the scene when Costa tries to make a monetary deal with Daniel to prevent him from protesting until the shoot's completion, Daniel is at first silent. A frustrated Costa wonders out loud if Daniel is merely performing the role of "the silent, dignified Indian." Eventually, however, Daniel accepts Costa's money, anticipating that his family would need it in their struggles. In moments such as this one, *Even the Rain* portrays Daniel as neither the timeless, dignified Indian that Costa invokes, nor the genetically programmed malcontent that the Bolivian politician imagines in his conversation with the Spanish filmmakers. Because the viewer is trained through the course of the film to oscillate between prior and existing regimes of power, a historically specific interaction between colonizer and colonized replaces a generalized conception of "otherness." Costa learns to see Daniel's reality in a historical context, and his shift in consciousness becomes a model for the viewer to follow.

Yet, despite its attentiveness to the historical dynamics of colonial relations, *Even the Rain* draws on conventions of the sentimental colonial narrative, especially in its attempt at bringing closure to its complex plot. In the film's penultimate scene, Daniel comes to the film set to give Costa a

Whereas the Indians in Sebastian's film are ineffective in preventing the crucifixion, Daniel's community successfully releases him by toppling the police car.



Costa's attempts to contain Daniel's resistance trigger his own internal transformation.



Even the Rain's final act abandons the historical network narrative for a linear structure tracking a metropolitan character's moral transformation. In the penultimate scene, Daniel thanks Costa for saving his daughter's life.



Daniel's and Costa's reconciliation exposes the film's debt to conventions that legitimize metropolitan humanity via acts of gratitude from the colonized.

parting gift and to thank him for saving his daughter's life. This penultimate scene between Daniel and Costa is perhaps the most strained, as it reflects *Even the Rain's* debt to Euro-American storytelling conventions that require the enacting of reconciliation between colonizer and colonized in order to confirm the European's ability to eventually be human. As is often the case within this narrative structure, the colonizer figure's humanity is salvaged through an act of bravery or kindness that elicits gratitude.

The inter-personal and private register of this reconciliation brings a superficial sense of closure to the historical contradictions that the film so painstakingly exposes in its first two acts. In other words, the abrupt transition from network mode to linear development indexes fundamental tensions underlying the film's form—between telling a “history from below” and marketing the story to ensure global distribution, and between revealing historical colonial conflict and enacting private resolution to this conflict.

Even the Rain ends with a view of the busy streets of Cochabamba taken from a moving car— only the passenger inside is Costa and not Sebastian (as in the film's opening shot). In another strained moment, Costa holds up the gift that Daniel gives him before they part: it is a small bottle of water to which Costa responds by saying out loud, “yaku,” the Quechua word for water that the protestors had been using in their struggle. Costa's ability to recall this word is a sign that he has come to see matters from the perspective of the indigenous Bolivians. The film suggests possibility in Costa's act of compassion and newfound ability to appreciate the realities of those he once dehumanized. Interestingly, though, the next shot is of the driver's eyes watching Costa through the rearview mirror. As in the rest of the film, this silent gaze serves to clinch the scene and to remind us of a perspective that remains marginalized or totally forgotten.

Conclusion

Even the Rain's final scenes depart strikingly from its established method of paralleling and contrasting past and present modes of imperial domination. The strained moments and streamlining of plot within its final section index the pressure exerted on the film's style by market forces. Yet, although it cannot sustain the network form or challenge conventions that centralize the metropolitan character's moral transformation, the film is nevertheless “ideologically unsettling” (Levine 520) of facile notions of global interconnectedness that mask histories and ongoing realities of capitalist exploitation.

Through its historical perspective Bollaín and Laverty's film shows us how contemporary neoliberal capitalism and its supporting free market ideology reinforce longstanding social exploitation. Neoliberalism, writes Harvey,

“holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market” (*Neoliberalism* 3).

Although neoliberal doctrine claims to be in service of social good, the basis for its broadening of market logic is the increased dispossession of those who have been historically impoverished and marginalized. By focusing on the Cochabamba water crisis and its links with a colonial past,



In another strained moment, Costa says “yaku” in recognition of the significance of Daniel’s parting gift to him.



A shot of the taxi driver’s gaze returns us to the perspective of ordinary Bolivians.



The water company’s office in *Even the Rain* bears the traces of a successful mass movement that drives the private multinational out of Bolivia.

Even the Rain exposes how neoliberal privatization has a vastly disproportionate impact on those who have been locked into a cycle of poverty.

We learn from the final conversation between Costa and Daniel that the multinational water company pulls out of Bolivia, thanks to the efforts of Daniel and others who protested for days. This in fact is what took place in Bolivia during the early 2000s.[19] As Jim Shultz explains,

“For almost two decades Bolivian economics had been dominated by the Washington consensus, market-driven policies pushed by the World Bank and the IMF and carried out by national leadership that was fiercely obedient to those policies. The water revolt shook those arrangements to their core” (28).

Not only did the revolt manage to force out the multinational but also the increased power of social movements following the Water War paved the way for the election in 2005 of Evo Morales, Bolivia’s first indigenous president. As Shultz observes,

“Facing down the government of a former dictator, overcoming the power of one of the world’s largest corporations, and reversing a fundamental policy of one of the world’s most powerful financial institutions, the humble people of a city virtually unknown outside the country had won a victory that would soon echo its way to Washington and to the world.” (26)

Shultz argues that in fact, “Officials at institutions such as the World Bank found themselves having to defend their policies in the aftermath of Cochabamba” (28).

I should emphasize that my point in comparing the aesthetic strategies of *Babel* and *Even the Rain* is neither to reject the former film as politically suspect nor to glorify the latter as politically pure. Rather, my aim in juxtaposing the two films is to comment on the implications of emphasizing spatial and accidental over temporal and structural linkages within contemporary network narratives. By inviting viewers to ponder how historically created, unequal power dynamics structure interactions between much of the world’s population, *Even the Rain* complicates commonplace assertions about global connection. Put differently, Bollaín and Laverty’s alterative network narrative invites reflection on *how* linkages between geographically distant individuals and communities have been produced within the modern world system. In the end, the film challenges heroic depictions of Columbus and the Conquistadors on the one hand and myths of neoliberal reason on the other. At a time when our corporations and politicians celebrate capital’s global mobility and propagate the idea that there is “no alternative” to economic privatization, [20] *Even the Rain* reminds viewers that capitalism has been and can still be challenged through solidarity and popular resistance.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to John McClure for thought-provoking conversation on *Even the Rain*, to the *Jump Cut* editors for excellent feedback, and to Kate Eggleston for valuable help with the visuals.

1. Bechtel is a politically influential engineering firm from San Francisco that, as Jim Shultz explains,

“has been responsible for some of the biggest infrastructure projects of the last hundred years, including the Hoover Dam, Northern California’s BART transit system, and the troubled Boston “Big Dig” project.... In 2004, Bechtel’s political clout was made even clearer when it was one of two U.S. companies selected by the Bush administration, with no competitive bidding, to receive contracts for rebuilding in Iraq, a deal worth nearly \$1 billion” (15).

[\[return to page 1\]](#)

2. Jagoda’s historically-informed analysis of network form draws on the work of sociologists, military strategists, as well as post-9/11 cultural texts like the film *Syriana*.

3. In *The Condition of Postmodernity* Harvey describes late twentieth-century capitalism as marked by a shift from fixed, Fordist methods of production to more flexible modes of capital accumulation, involving financial speculation and increased mobility of capital across geographical boundaries.

4. Harvey defines neoliberalism as

“a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices....But beyond these tasks the state should not venture” (*Neoliberalism* 2).

Harvey adds that while neoliberal theory began to gain traction in the 1970s,

“The capitalist world stumbled towards neoliberalization as the answer through a series of gyrations and chaotic experiments that really only converged as a new orthodoxy with the articulation of what became known as the ‘Washington Consensus’ in the 1990s” (*Neoliberalism* 13).

5. Jim Shultz describes how,

“In February 1996, Cochabamba’s mayor announced to the press that the World Bank was making privatization... a condition of an urgent \$14 million loan to expand water service.... Left with little choice, in 1999 the government of Bolivia put Cochabamba’s public water system up for private bid” (15).

Bechtel’s eventual ownership of Cochabamba’s water system had disastrous consequences for residents’ water bills. Shultz adds that, “rate increases... averaged more than 50 percent, and in some cases much higher” (18).

6. Networks, as a form of social organization, are also not new. A key theorist of networks within the contemporary capitalist world system is sociologist Manuel Castells, who introduced the term “network society.” In *The Rise of the Network Society*, Castells defines a network as “a set of interconnected nodes” (501) and argues,

“While the networking form of social organization has existed in other times and spaces, the new information technology paradigm provides the material basis for its pervasive expansion throughout the entire social structure” (500).

7. In another essay, “From Genre to Form,” Levine argues that the networked form of *Bleak House* resembles that of the long-form television series, *The Wire*:

“In both narratives, almost every character acts as a node in at least one network, whether that is the city, the family, economics, philanthropy, or the law; and the vast majority of characters in these texts act as nodes in two or more different networks.... [B]oth texts go to some trouble to stress that characters are less important because they are exemplary or synecdochal than because they play crucial roles in institutional networks.”

8. Jagoda attributes the term “hyperlink cinema” to Roger Ebert; however, in an online review of the film, *Syriana*, Ebert suggests that he borrowed the term from a “recent blog item.”

9. Immanuel Wallerstein differentiates between “core” and “peripheral” zones of the modern world-system, with “core” referring to the advanced capitalist economies and “peripheral” referring to the less developed economies that core nations exploit or plunder for the furthering of capitalist accumulation.

10. See Rachael K Bosley’s article, “Forging Connections,” for *American Cinematographer* magazine.

11. Paul Laverty has written the scripts for several Ken Loach films including *Carla's Song* (1996), *Bread and Roses* (2000), *Sweet Sixteen* (2002), *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* (2006), *Route Irish* (2010), and *The Angels' Share* (2012). [[return to page 2](#)]

12. Icíar Bollaín mentions in an interview with *DP/30* that Iñárritu left because he began production on another film, *Biutiful*.

13. Here Laverty draws on Zinn's description of the Conquistadors chasing down Native Americans with dogs. In *A People's History of the United States* Zinn writes,

“The Indians had been given an impossible task. The only gold around was bits of dust garnered from the streams. So they fled, were hunted down with dogs and were killed” (4).

Laverty also draws on Zinn's account when constructing a disturbing scene within Sebastian's film where the Spaniards use dogs to chase down Hatuey and his people.

14. *Even the Rain* pays homage here to Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (1960), a film that opens with shots of a helicopter carrying a Christ statue over the city of Rome.

15. Laverty's imagination of Sebastian's film relies on minor details from Zinn's historical account. For instance, Zinn describes the Arawak Indians as wearing “tiny gold ornaments in their ears” (3). Here Anton improvises on stage directions for Sebastian's film when he decides to pull at the waitress's gold earring and inquire about where the gold is.

16. *Even the Rain's* representation of the protests and curfew draws on events that took place in Cochabamba between January and April of 2000. Jim Shultz describes how up to 10,000 people gathered in the city square: “Many of the people were from the city, but thousands of others had marched long distances from the countryside and had been there for days” (23). In response, “The government declared an emergency and brought in military forces to quell the protests: “Constitutional rights were suspended; a curfew and a ban on meetings were imposed; and soldiers shut off radio broadcasts in midsentence” (25). [[return to page 3](#)]

17. See Thomas Dawson's interview with Paul Laverty in “On the Side of the Angels.”

18. This is also one of the most self-referential moments in the film, raising questions about the ethics of *Even the Rain's* production team. In an interview with *DP/30*, Bollaín mentions that her crew was self-conscious when making the film about whether they were exploiting the Bolivians. She adds that, “At least it was in our aim to listen to the people we were going to work with.” To this end, her team asked the local communities what they wanted by way of compensation. On a couple of occasions, the communities urged the filmmakers to not only pay the extras but also contribute toward the community as a whole. Bollaín claims that this experience taught her to

depart from a narrowly individualistic mode of thinking.

19. “[O]n the afternoon of Monday, April 10, the government made an announcement. Officials of Bechtel’s company, who sat out days of violence watching it on television in a five-star hotel and insisting they wouldn’t leave, had fled to the airport and left the country. The Bolivian government declared the contract canceled, saying in a letter to Bechtel’s people, “Given that the directors of your enterprise have left the city of Cochabamba and were not to be found . . . said contract is rescinded” (Shultz 26).

20. David Harvey points out,

“Consent for neoliberalization was achieved through force as well as by producing “a fatalistic, even abject acceptance of the idea that there was and is, as Margaret Thatcher kept insisting, ‘no alternative’” (*Neoliberalism* 40).

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



1a. Alberto Fischerman's forgotten film, *The Players vs. Ángeles caídos/The Players vs. Fallen Angels*



1b. Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's revered documentary, *La hora de los hornos/The Hour of the Furnaces*

Two well known production stills from films made in Argentina in 1968. The immediate similarities and subtle differences between the two images are emblematic of the film-historical legacy of each work. The low-key lighting of the still from *The Players* here accentuates the hedonistic languor of the characters jumbled pell-mell into the frame, an evocation of the film's sense of anarchic play and creative invention. By contrast, the image from *The Hour* pushes the chiaroscuro to abstraction—a visual corollary to the film's Manichaean rendition of political militancy—while the equally crowded *mise-en-scène* captures the shouting faces of the filmmakers' implicit protagonist: the revolutionary Argentine masses.

The revolution must (not) be advertised. *The Players vs. Ángeles Caídos*, the discourse of advertising, and the limits of political modernism

by [Greg Cohen](#)

There is a tale ripe for the telling of one of the greatest works of avant-garde cinema nearly no one has ever seen. Alberto Fischerman's iconoclastic feature, *The Players vs. Ángeles Caídos/The Players vs. Fallen Angels* (1968), was shot in Argentina in the volatile twilight of a tempestuous decade.[1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) By a fateful stroke of historical coincidence, Fischerman's masterful first film debuted in the same year as that juggernaut of agit-prop documentary familiar to all (if only by name to some), *La hora de los hornos/The Hour of the Furnaces* (Argentina, 1968), by Fernando "Pino" Solanas and Octavio Getino **[Fig. 1a-b]**. Yet, whereas *The Hour* is by now as firmly enshrined in the patrimony of Latin American political cinema as it is in the broader (if more nebulous) heritage of so-called World Cinema, *The Players* endures in near perfect oblivion outside Argentina, although at home it enjoys a certain hallowed obscurity, remembered mainly by the artist-intellectuals who worked with Fischerman in the 60s and 70s, were inspired by his dynamic *opera prima*, and formed with him an ephemeral independent alliance known as "The Group of 5" (*el Grupo de los 5*).[2]

Truth be told, it can be difficult to discuss Fischerman's film today without conjuring up its obverse in Solanas and Getino's. Indeed, despite their divergent legacies within film history, both works issued from the same crucible of political and cultural discourses in the Argentine 60s, marked above all by the ideal of *liberation*, to which Latin American cultural scholar Diana Sorensen (channeling Raymond Williams) has pointed as "the ruling force in the structure of feeling that informed the decade" in Latin America as a whole.[3]

Understood in hindsight as a third-world inflection of the global revolutionary moment, the discourse of liberation in the Americas may have operated on a level more rhetorical than programmatic; as a utopian construct, it offered an expedient for sublimating the most disparate national political specificities into a single, abstract, pan-continental ideal. In the cultural field, by contrast—especially as the "long decade" of the 60s waned[4]—the principle of liberation often worked in conspicuously prescriptive ways, defining what kinds of art were either properly revolutionary or inadequately political, and thus either historically relevant or worthy of disregard.

Perhaps inevitably, then, liberation would also come to represent a "ruling force" in the structure of 1960s Latin American film discourse. Early on it



2a. *Throw a Dime*, dir. Fernando Birri (Argentina, 1958).



2b. *Black God, White Devil*, dir. Glauber Rocha (Brazil, 1963)



2c. *Memories of Underdevelopment*, dir. Tomás

established the unwritten protocols of inclusion in the canon of films we designate for study and preservation to this day, for which the obscure fate of *The Players* offers an instructive example. By the same token, the underpinnings of liberation discourse have proven decidedly tenacious in their modulation of the rules for scholarly engagement with films made in Latin America between the mid-1950s and the mid-1970s. This has often been a matter of upholding an opposition (now anachronistic) between the “political” and the “aesthetic” avant-gardes, a distinction that likewise governed the contemporaneous discourse of political modernism in Anglo-American and European film theory and practice.[5]

Hence, even now, when we speak of the Latin American cinema of the 60s, we rarely look beyond a circumscribed lineage of works ostensibly identified with explicit, Left-radical political programs in the region, never mind the many forgotten films like Fischerman’s that, while arguably just as radical on both the political and aesthetic levels, were deemed in the end too formalist to have landed on the right side of political art. Hence also, a certain evaluative dogma (sometimes tacit, more often overt) still seems to preside over a considerable amount of scholarship on what is known by convention as the “New Latin American Cinema.” According to such a position, the historical significance of a given Latin American film from the 60s—that is to say, its revolutionary-political pedigree, irrespective of its formal innovations—must ultimately emanate from its putative commitment to a *pan-continental* project of liberation. The politics of film scholarship, in other words, have advanced and sustained the notion of the New Latin American Cinema as a viable film-historical designation mainly by tethering it to the discourse of liberation in the Latin American 60s.

It should come as no surprise, then, that experts in the field of Latin American film studies have also long construed the New Latin American Cinema as a coherent and self-aware, pan-Latin American movement of political filmmaking, with a well-established genealogy and its discrete corpus of sanctioned works. From the vantage of the present, though, we might question whether the existence of such a movement was ever more than an invention of film scholarship itself. More tenable, it seems, is to understand the New Latin American Cinema—like the concept of liberation from which it derives—as a largely symbolic ideological construct, a “structure of feeling” capable of subsuming an otherwise motley array of *auteurist* films, whether from largely national if not regional new cinemas, or from directors working in relative isolation, in the general absence of any autonomous film movement[6]. **[Fig. 2a-d]**

Such, undoubtedly, were the abstract ideological grounds on which Solanas and Getino themselves erected the framework of their quasi-theoretical manifesto of 1969, “Towards a Third Cinema.” Written one year after the production of their documentary, the text famously projected film history in teleological, historical-materialist terms as a tripartite development that originated with the illusionist “First Cinema” of Hollywood and its industrial avatars, then passed through the independent but elitist, bourgeois “Second Cinema” that superseded it, before culminating with the ideologically superior—because truly revolutionary—“Third Cinema” of militant, oppositional, and categorically political film practice.[7]

Third Cinema, in effect, was to signify a new mode of production that would *liberate* global film discourse from the capitalist and neo-colonial system to which it had been historically bound; its aspirational reach thus not only traversed the Americas, but presumably extended to militant filmmaking subjects the world over. Yet in practice and in rhetoric, to say nothing of style, most of the Latin American films of the 1960s and 70s that have come to

Gutiérrez Alea (Cuba, 1968)



2d. *Blood of the Condor*, dir. Jorge Sanjinés (Bolivia, 1969)

The four films above are customarily associated with the New Latin American Cinema of the Sixties, which film scholarship has long construed as a coherent pan-Latin American film movement. In reality, each was forged within a specific national context, and in essential isolation from the others. Birri shot his film with the help of students at a provincial university film school he founded; Gutiérrez Alea worked wholly within the Cuban government's national film system; Sanjinés filmed independently, later forming a production cooperative that relied on collaboration by indigenous peasants. As a leading figure of Brazil's *Cinema Novo*, perhaps Rocha alone among the four shown here can truly be seen to have operated within an actual new cinema movement... albeit an entirely *national* one.



3a.

exemplify either Third Cinema or the New Latin American Cinema—generally on the basis of Solanas and Getino's writings—were almost always conceived in response to resolutely *national* circumstances, rather than to patently Latin American ones.[8] To my mind, Latin American film scholarship has yet adequately to confront this basic paradox.

There exists, meanwhile, at least one other vital facet of the larger discursive formation in the Latin American 60s that scholarship on the so-called New Latin American Cinema has seemed equally given to overlook. I refer to the theoretical critique of the popular mass media that was emerging in the 1960s and 70s, above all in relation to the medium of advertising, a veritable growth industry in post-war Argentina.[9] Indeed, given just how many critical theorists at the time were turning their attention to the ideological dimensions of mass communications, such disregard for the place of advertising in Latin American political cinema in the 60s is all the more curious.[10]

It is a lack that also invites an important observation: if Latin American film historiography, operating on notions of (properly) political and (irredeemably) aesthetic modes of cultural production, has tended to locate works like Fischerman's at the irreconcilable antipodes of those like Solanas and Getino's, in fact *The Players* and *The Hour of the Furnaces* strike a notable if awkward truce on the terrain of advertising discourse, to which each work shares a decisive, even constitutive critical relation, however divergent the one from the other in method and inflection.

To begin, it was not merely Fischerman and members of his avant-garde cohort, but also Solanas who came by his cinematic training as a professional director of of advertising films (notably, Fischerman's first employer in the business was none other than Pino Solanas).[11] Both artists, moreover, ran their own advertising production companies and financed their films with the proceeds, a fact that existing analyses of Fischerman and the *Group of 5* routinely underscore, while scholarship on Solanas and Getino's documentary tends to excuse it, despite the obvious dissonance between Solanas's chosen métier and the vociferous denunciation of advertising and imperialist mass media he would depict in *The Hour of the Furnaces*. [12]

More important for my purposes here, however, are the very deliberate critical *uses* of advertising discourse that anchor the aesthetic programs of both films, though to my mind it is *The Players* that engages with advertising in more complex, even prescient ways than its counterpart. In so doing—if I may invoke Marshall McLuhan, whose ideas at this point in the 60s were very much “in the air”—Fischerman's film betrays a subtle critical understanding of advertising media in the abstract, in ways distinct from (though not entirely incongruous with) the ideals of “militant” cinema espoused by Solanas and Getino.[13] In turn, *The Players* may just tell us something that liberation discourse—by way of Third Cinema and the New Latin American Cinema paradigm—has largely overlooked about the broader nexus of art, politics, and mass media at the end of the Latin American 60s.

A match made in misery: *The Players* and *The Hours* in the Argentine 60s

To be sure, neither Solanas and Getino's nor Fischerman's film was exempt from the parade of contradictions that traversed political and cultural life in late-1960s Argentina, a time, incidentally, during which ever more galvanized calls on the Left for all-out revolutionary violence coincided with a sharp ebb in the early euphoria inspired by post-Revolutionary Cuba, which by then had begun to exert blatantly repressive restrictions on the activities of artists and intellectuals.[14]



3b.



Just as much as *The Hour of the Furnaces*, Alberto Fischerman's *The Players vs. Ángeles caídos* offered a radical response to the political conditions in late-1960s Argentina. In June, 1966, the armed forces ousted President Arturo Illía in a military coup and installed General Juan Carlos Onganía (a) as head of state. Trumpeting what he cynically called a “real revolution”—“una verdadera revolución,” reads a headline from the time of the coup (b)—Onganía immediately restricted all alleged “subversive” activity in Argentina. Among the first acts of his administration: the violent removal of faculty members from the University of Buenos Aires (c), in an event known as “La noche de los bastones largos” (“The Night of the Long Sticks”). The Onganía regime promptly took full administrative control of the country's university system.

Still, in Argentina, national liberation seemed perhaps as inevitable as it did elusive. In 1966, right-wing General Juan Carlos Onganía had ousted President Arturo Illía and taken power in a military putsch, under the cynical banner of the “Argentine Revolution,” and proceeded to abolish all political parties, intervene (violently) in the administration of national universities, and establish draconian censorship regimes aimed at eradicating society of political and cultural “subversives” [Fig. 3a-c]. Matters only worsened when dissenting factions within the military itself toppled Onganía in June of 1970, supplanting his junta with their own under the rule of General Roberto M. Levingston, who presided over a precipitous economic contraction, a growing labor crisis, and massive anti-government rioting around the country. Yet another military coup within the junta deposed Levingston just nine months later and replaced him with General Alejandro Lanusse, who served as President of the Republic until the return to electoral politics in 1973 that would ultimately reinstall Juan Domingo Perón to power after nearly two decades of exile.

The so-called Revolution inaugurated with Onganía touted the restoration of order (and centralized, military-oligarchic control of the state and its economy) after the vicissitudes of the preceding decade, which had witnessed successive, nominally democratic administrations from various ambits of the political Left (punctuated by brief military interregna). The presidencies of Arturo Frondizi (1958-1962) and Arturo Illía (1963-66) were by turns progressive and ineffectual, each straining to steer the country's unwieldy ship in the wake of Perón's own military ouster in 1955. Throughout this period, Argentina saw a mixture of conciliatory policies meant to appeal to working-class Peronist sympathies (despite Frondizi's total ban, until 1962, on Peronist political parties), coupled with programs of economic liberalization and development that initially generated considerable growth, though results grew more anemic as the decade wore on. Concurrently, however, in the wake of what numerous artists and intellectuals viewed as the dark ages of the first Perón administration, the Frondizi-Illía period also heralded a truly dynamic cultural awakening among the middle classes, mostly in Buenos Aires and largely internationalist and cosmopolitan in spirit.

The principle engine of avant-garde art in Argentina by the dawn of the 1960s, the Di Tella also doubtless stood among the most important nodes of artistic activity in the Americas as a whole.[15] Through vigorous and eclectic programming, the organization not only generated and hosted traveling exhibitions of international art, but also sponsored international juried competitions, awarded prestigious prizes, and administered scholarships for artistic study abroad. Meanwhile, both at home and overseas, the Di Tella promoted cutting-edge production by national artists who worked in every conceivable medium, from painting and sculpture to music and theater, and from film and photography to installation, performance, and new audio-visual technologies. Most importantly, the Di Tella was a crucible of creative community and alternative forms of social interaction: its legendary Happenings and “Experiences” were steeped in the spirit of social freedom and experimentation that characterized so many ambits of the 60s globally.



4 a-c. Crucial to the process of cultural aperture that marked the Argentine Sixties (and to some degree motivated the 1966 military coup) was the activity of the Instituto Di Tella, a center for the arts located in the heart of Buenos Aires (a). The Di Tella's ambitions were resolutely cosmopolitan; the innovations and renown of its artists helped transform Buenos Aires into an international hub of avant-garde art on par with New York. The center sponsored work of every conceivable medium and genre, from painting and sculpture to experimental music and theater, as well as audio-visual installation. Above: (b) *Verificación esquemática/Schematic Verification*, Antonio Trotta, 1968; (c) scene from the play, *Familia obrera/Working Class Family*, by Oscar Bony, 1968; and (d) *Situación de tiempo/Situation of Time*, David Lamelas, 1967.

The efforts of the Di Tella were thus instrumental in repositioning Buenos Aires as a global center of avant-garde art in the 1960s. David Lamelas, Marta Minujín, León Ferrari, and Julio LeParc were but a few of the Argentine artists of international stature to fill the Institute's ranks. Indeed, to the same degree that its aesthetic and intellectual ambitions rested on the value of rupture and innovation, the Di Tella's declared mission was adamantly internationalist in thrust. As such, it benefited directly from initiatives like the *Alliance for Progress*, a program of cultural diplomacy in the Americas spearheaded in the United States by the Kennedy administration. In turn, crucial financial support arrived from American philanthropic foundations like the Ford and Rockefeller, as well as numerous, highly publicized collaborations with the likes of MoMA and the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

Simply stated, the Instituto Di Tella was inseparable from the broader processes of modernization and internationalization in the Argentine 60s. It is no wonder, then, that for some it could so readily signify the country's intellectual vitality and cultural legitimacy on the global stage, while for others—particularly the growing cadres of political militants as the decade progressed—it conjured nothing less than the neo-colonization of national culture by a small domestic elite in league with foreign interests [Fig. 5a-b]. An easy target of virulent criticism from both extremes of the political spectrum in Argentina at the time,



5a.



5b.

As political radicalization intensified in Argentina in the wake of the Onganía coup, the internationalism of the Di Tella grew increasingly susceptible to attacks from both extremes of the ideological spectrum. At top, a frame from Solanas and Getino's *Hour of the Furnaces* (a), shot at a Happening at the Instituto Di Tella, with its famed Director, Jorge Romero Brest, in attendance. The ensuing sequence culminates in a moralizing indictment from the perspective of the militant Left, which here casts the Di Tella as a cauldron of bourgeois privilege and politically alienated frivolity: the very picture of neo-colonialism. Above, the vandalizing, in 1968, of the Di Tella's downtown headquarters (5b), carried out by the right-wing, ultra-nationalist Tacuara Movement, for which the Institute symbolized the moral corruption of Argentine culture: a poisonous seedbed of decadence, subversion and, even worse, communism.

the Di Tella in fact crystallized all of the complex yearnings and contradictions of the Latin American 60s, in much the same way as Solanas and Getino's *Hora* and Fischerman's *Players*.

In response to these impulses of modernization and rupture, along with their underlying internationalism, the right-wing *Revolución Argentina* imposed autocratic economic development schemes favorable mainly to the country's landed classes and traditional agro-industrial oligarch families. At the same time, it redoubled its political marginalization of nearly all Peronist elements in society (that is to say, the powerful labor unions and, by extension, most of Argentina's immense working class), proceeding meanwhile to invoke deeply reactionary and nationalist cultural discourses that were entirely unsympathetic to either the cosmopolitanism of organizations like the Di Tella (as well as artists like Fischerman) or the overt political militancy of filmmakers like Solanas and Getino.

As the decade advanced and censorship and repression mounted, it was only a matter of time before intellectuals and artists of all stripes would begin to see ideological radicalization as the only path towards greater social justice, cultural freedom, and economic stability. With the advent of the 1970s, calls for armed resistance across the political spectrum coalesced into violent guerrilla activism, with both left-wing guerrillas (the Montoneros; the People's Revolutionary Army, or ERP) and right-wing paramilitary groups (the Argentine Anti-Communist Alliance, or Triple A) vying for control of Perón's renascent movement. Even still, while much artistic output in this political conjuncture tacked increasingly toward explicit Left-Revolutionary rhetoric, not all *engagés* artists in Argentina at the time abandoned high-modernist aesthetic concerns.

In all events, the exigency to choose between the seething middle-class desire "to be modern" on the one hand and, on the other, the historical imperative to resist the ideological "invasion" of national culture by "Yankee imperialist" values—to invoke several catch-phrases of the day—was assuming truly *mortal* weight with every passing moment of the waning 1960s in Argentina. Perhaps predictably, such contradictions were also coalescing beneath the carefree surface of nearly every sixty-second advertising spot that aired on Argentine television at the time.

There exists no more poignant testimony to that fact than a prominent commercial for Jockey cigarettes made in 1971.[16] [Fig. 6a-i, see below] This advertisement is edited in graceful flourishes of mobile framings linked in rhythmic montage, featuring smiling flocks of fashionable young men and women (all of unequivocally European extraction) gliding in an effortless choreography through the set of a cocktail party at a well-appointed, seaside vacation home. The concept that immediately bubbles to that ebullient visual surface is an identification of affluent domestic space with the experience of unfettered yet sophisticated leisure time. What is more, with its tag line —*Jockey, la pura verdad* ("Jockey, the pure truth")—the commercial strongly implies that affluence itself may be the purest form of affective bond among truly "modern" Argentines. Equally noteworthy is the way the ad orchestrates these ideas within an evening-time, maritime idyll, where the exterior space serves—particularly for well-dressed, cigarette-smoking women—as but an

extension of that microcosm of free society taking place back inside, in the private domain.

Such values are only further underscored by the honeyed, pop-cosmopolitan soundtrack against which all this pleurability unfolds, namely a rendition of the über-hit of summer 1971, “Soley-Soley,” by Scottish band Middle of the Road. In the Argentine spot, the tune resurfaces in a version by Spanish rock-composer Fernando Arbex, whose translation of the original English lyrics —“Just a little bit lonely / just a little bit sad / I was feeling so empty / until you came back”—transforms their meaning in Spanish into something considerably more saccharine: “With a bit of sand / and a bit of sea / as long as you’re with me / there’s nothing more I need.”[17] Considered in unison with the commercial’s liberated nightlife aesthetic, such a casual elision of the song’s original loneliness, sadness, and emptiness not only belies the turbulent contradictions of the political moment, but also presages the far greater darkness of the “Dirty War” about to befall the country, one that would surely surpass even the menace of Onganía’s *Revolución*.

This point is made manifest by a single, trenchant detail of the *mise-en-scène*: the left-most of the three actresses smoking and walking toward the camera once the commercial cuts to the exterior—she also enjoys a brief medium-close up of her own [Fig. 7]—was a well-known Franco-Argentine model from the far-flung northern province of Misiones named Marie-Anne Erize Tisseau. Already a political activist at the time of the Jockey ad, within years Erize would join the ranks of the Montoneros and work closely with Argentine Liberation Theologist, Father Carlos Mugica; with the coming, in 1976, of Argentina’s most horrific military dictatorship, Erize would also soon count among the thousands of young activists “disappeared” by the junta for their political opposition.[28]



7. The latent contradictions of the Jockey ad are nowhere more salient than in the presence of one of its central characters, played by Franco-Argentine model Marie-Anne Erize Tisseau. Already involved in political activism at the time of the commercial’s production, Tisseau would later count among those brutally “disappeared” by the Argentine military junta installed in 1976.

The Jockey cigarette TV commercial





This 1971 television commercial for Jockey cigarettes, set in an evening-time idyll of bourgeois leisure, links gracefully choreographed mobile framings of well-heeled young Argentines in rhythmic, dynamic montage, set to the soundtrack of an imported Scottish pop song translated into Spanish. The “pure truth” of affluence it promotes not only typifies the prevailing disposition of advertising discourse in Argentina at the end of the Sixties, but also lends credence to the growing perception among the country’s increasingly radicalized middle-classes at the time that the nation’s mass media were the object of total “neo-colonial” domination.

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From “pure truth” to radical uselessness: Fischerman’s advertising tactics

The same, subterranean tensions at work in the advertisement described here—between modernization and revolution; between hedonistic consumerism and working-class asceticism; between neo-colonial oppression and capitalist desire—prove just as useful for locating Alberto Fischerman’s *The Players vs. Fallen Angels* in the nexus of social and political relations from which it issued and the popular mass media to which it reacted. Accordingly, one viable theoretical approach to Fischerman’s film might be to construe it as an exercise in resistance to alienated capitalist labor that resolves itself, not in militant *action*, but rather in a kind of active, rigorously functional *uselessness*.

[Click here to open [a visual essay, Figs. 8-21](#), in a separate window The following section of the text refers to the images in this visual essay about [The Players vs. Fallen Angels and The Hours of the Furnaces](#)..]

The plot of the film is intentionally slight, and involves the allegorical struggle between two groups—the eponymous “Players” and “Fallen Angels”—for a territory of apparent freedom and imagination. That territory happens to be the abandoned sound stages of Estudios Lumiton, the last of Buenos Aires’s Golden Age film studios. High above the sound stages, looking on from the lofts, bridges and catwalks to which they have been relegated by the victory of the Players (in a past battle the film mentions only in passing), the Fallen Angels **[Fig. 8a-c]** bide their time plotting—and failing to execute—the reconquest of the lost paradise below. The Players, meanwhile, haunt the jetsam of old sets and dressing rooms **[Fig. 9a-c]**, enacting the communal tedium of their uncontested reign in a series of absurdist experiments and improvised tableaux, each corresponding to its own elemental concept—birth, affection, jealousy, force, fantasy—and each filmed in accordance with a unique audio-visual syntax.[19] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

As the narrative gradually marginalizes the insurgent Fallen Angels (eventually dispensing with them altogether), the Players prepare to stage a freely adapted version of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* **[Fig. 10a-b]**. At last, the film ends with a violent though inconclusive confrontation between Players and Fallen Angels, but not before a party in which both camps mingle blithely with Alberto Fischerman and his crew **[Fig. 11a-c]**, along with other directors from the mythical *Group of 5*, all of them now seen filming the very footage we are watching. In the end, out of the ruins of a forsaken film studio and its own, self-referential logic of radical unproductiveness, *The Players*

strains to produce a domain of revolutionary leisure, a move that seems to align, across oceans and hemispheres, with the heretical Marxist humanism of Henri Lefebvre, who at the time began to perceive in the space of leisure the last possibility for a truly differential resistance to the homogenizing oppression of capitalist labor.[20]

Of course, the attempt to translate its peculiar revolutionary politics of collective hedonism into a radicalized film form is precisely what distinguishes *The Players* from *The Hour of the Furnaces*. By notorious contrast, Solanas and Getino's four-hour amalgam of dialectical and vertical montage, *cinéma vérité*, sermonic intertitles, straight-ahead objective documentary, and the pop-conceptualist appropriation of scraps of popular media—including a profusion of print and TV advertising imagery—batters the spectator with a more dour, more dogmatic, though considerably less ambiguous logic of anti-imperialist revolution[21] **[Fig. 12a-l]**.

In effect, Solanas and Getino's ideological program, underwritten by the ideal of national liberation and articulated in deliberately Manichaean terms, betrays what several scholars have perceived in the film as an implicit—and, I believe, simplistic—logic of advertising, essentially aimed at co-opting “the System's” own aesthetic tools in order to turn that System against itself and thereby “sell the Revolution” instead.[22] Julio Ludueña, a filmmaker who belonged to Fischerman's wider avant-garde circle, has even dismissed *The Hour of the Furnaces* outright as “one long commercial made with political objectives.”[23]

Analyses such as these, however, appear to confuse the persuasive visual language of agit-prop with the prevailing formal principles of 60s-era advertising *per se*. In truth, there is no single moment or sequence of *The Hour of the Furnaces* that mimics or resembles the structure of a filmed advertisement in any self-conscious way. Rather, we can better understand the Solanas and Getino documentary's critical engagement with advertising discourse as a form of re-appropriation in the service of ideological demystification. In a word, the film employs the strategy of *détournement*, construed precisely in the terms and techniques defined as early as the latter 1950s by the Lettrist International and later by the Situationist International in France, which Guy Debord himself would later adapt to the formal strategies of filmmaking.[24]

None of this is to say that films like *The Players* did not share with those like *The Hour of the Furnaces* a common resistance to capitalism, its markets, its divisions of labor, and its modes of social production, particularly as they inflected the period's dominant forms of film production, distribution, exhibition, and spectatorship. In fact, the starkly opposing responses that each film musters to that common enemy in many ways crystallized all the deep-seated antagonisms of Left cultural politics in Argentina generally at the end of the 60s. According to Beatriz Sarlo, the two works marked extremes in an ideological landscape of multifarious modes of artistic practice, the battles among which had yet entirely to exhaust themselves, despite what many at the time (and arguably still today) saw as evidence to the contrary. Nevertheless, Sarlo admits, the cultural-political field was narrowing so precipitously by the

end of the decade that scarce room remained for the options proposed by films like Fischerman's. That is, from the standpoint of the militant Left, to defend the radicalization of aesthetic form as a still-viable mode of revolutionary politics seemed increasingly out of touch with the historical moment.[25]

In this light, while the overt and aggressive *détournement* of scavenged advertising media in Solanas and Getino's agit-prop leviathan seems eminently familiar to us now, it is worth contemplating what sets Fischerman's film apart in its own cinematic engagement with advertising discourse. To do so, I should like to turn now to a paradigmatic moment in *The Players vs. Fallen Angels*, just one of several in which the narrative slips seamlessly from its labyrinthine play of Brechtian reflexivity into a kind of simulated advertising mode of cinematic representation that, on second glance, suggests something considerably more subversive.

The sequence comes about halfway into the film, and follows a series of disjointed, improvised interactions among some of the Players that unfolds like a pageant of inspired *ennui* [Fig. 13a-c]. From there, a long series of alternating mobile and static framings, set to a non-diegetic cool jazz score, re-establishes the counterpoint between The Players and the Fallen Angels. [26] First, a number of slow lateral tracking shots in medium close-up back and forth along the cluttered floor of Lumiton Studios capture a group of the Players in repose; these are then intercut with two types of opposing shots. On the one hand, static, high-angle framings from the catwalks above are filmed over the shoulder of a Fallen Angel as he storyboards the film set far below; notably, whereas the crew is seen moving the camera along a pair of dolly tracks, the scene they film is subtly though conspicuously unlike that of the preceding tracking shots. On the other hand, we see quick close-up zooms into the drawings themselves, which depict in abstracted form the very *mise-en-scène* of the Players that we have witnessed in the preceding mobile framings. [Fig. 14a-f].

In the last of these contrasting series, we again watch over the shoulder of the Fallen Angel up among the rafters, as he rips up his sketches and scatters the scraps over the film set below. Then comes an abrupt cut to the studio floor, where a member of the crew shot in extreme close-up throws a large steel lever to the sound of the director calling, "Camera, Parodi!" Now, with a cut back to another high-angle, extreme long shot—this time without the Fallen Angel and his sketch pad—the jazz stops. We witness the film crew on set, tracking in towards a group of assistants opening a pair of massive black pocket doors in the far background, accompanied by further directives from the crew—"Open the door!" "Camera, Parodi!" "Action!") [Fig. 15]. A cut-in to a high-angle long shot of the crew follows, as the director shouts, "Take 2!" Then the camera tilts up gradually to reveal the crew tracking forward toward Luís, a character in striped pajamas seen earlier, now entering frame-left holding a cup of coffee and beginning to sing to a new musical number, with a man and woman standing together some ways behind him just beyond the pocket doors [Fig. 16a-b].

In effect, what immediately ensues will consist of the frontal dolly shot we

have just witnessed under construction, beginning with Luís framed in full scale in the foreground, and the couple in the background now practicing dance steps together in front of what appears to be the façade of a middle-class residential home. That façade, however, is surely part of yet another film set nested within the larger set of Lumiton Studios, itself a fabricated setting for the *mise-en-abyme* that is *The Players vs. Ángeles Caídos* [Fig. 17a-b].

This elaborate execution of interlocking, auto-referential gestures announces the first of the film's quasi-simulated advertising "spots." Not coincidentally, the song begun by Luís, soon to be taken up by the character of Cristina in the "advertisement sequence" proper, will at first seem to conjure the same easygoing picture of domestic leisure and bourgeois "purity" behind the standard television commercial of the day. In Luís's prelude—a lounge-like mixture of electric keyboard, strings, and winds—the lyrics begin, "I find myself awake again / with the world I left behind: / with my bedroom, with my girlfriend / with my cup of coffee...."[27]

At once the music shifts in tempo to a cheerful melody marking time with a snare drum and steel brush, as the film cuts to a close-up of Cristina counting beats, poised to continue the song, though her first attempt falters for having started an octave too high [Fig. 18]. The music stops short as she signals off-screen to the crew for another try, though her eye-line is matched not with a shot of the filmmakers, but rather with a brief, low-angle shot up to a pair of Fallen Angels roaming the bridges high above, that is, in a part of the set that may or may not be in proximity to the musical sketch transpiring below [Fig. 19a-b]. Meanwhile, the feigned croaking of Cristina's voice together with her ostentatious smile now sets Luís' words in dubious relief. Is he glad to reawake to the world he left behind, or does he in fact lament his captivity in a maze of conventions, where the doors of one contrived social space open onto the unremarkable contours of another, filled with its familiar objects and familiar people—same old bedroom, same old girlfriend, same old cup of coffee—and where imperturbable, smiling mannequins execute their daily, pre-determined gestures?

The jovial music begins again, this time a half-octave lower, and Cristina finds her key as the "advertisement sequence" commences in earnest: roughly fifteen dynamic shots of more or less equal duration capture a chipper troupe of freshly coiffed Players flitting and dancing about a large domestic kitchen, making preparations for a communal breakfast [Fig. 20a-f]. The camera is hand-held, and waltzes fluidly among and around The Players as they move in concert with one another, and all about the merry Cristina as she glides and sings:

"Today, I awoke so cheerful,
for I was cheerful when I went to bed.
My love fell asleep by my side
and I awoke with him.
La-da-da-da-dum, da-da-da,
La-da-da-da-dum, da-da,
My love fell asleep by my side
and I awoke with him

If I sleep in, I'll be late,
If I dress up, late it is.
If I make love I'll be late
but I'll make it just fine indeed"[28]

As the song winds down, the overlapping, diegetic sounds of knives clinking on butter dishes and coffee pouring into porcelain cups fades in, mingling with the small talk of The Players as they serve themselves their breakfast **[Fig. 21a-c]**. Up to this point, what has stood out most in the sequence is just how closely the filming of the scene in the kitchen of Fischerman's movie resembles that of the cocktail party in the commercial for Jockey cigarettes discussed above, from the roaming, mobile framings and rhythmic editing down to the very elements of the *mise-en-scène*. Again we witness a well-dressed group of young Argentine urbanites, eating and drinking in an affluent domestic setting. Again we behold the recognizable gestures of happy people relating to their happy friends.

Nonetheless, when the putative "commercial" ends here, the film does not cut back to its program already in progress in some other cinematic space, namely, the "story" of *The Players vs. Fallen Angels* unfolding in the recesses of Lumiton Studios. Rather, it lingers with these actors—these players—in their kitchen, recording their unscripted, blasé interactions as they enjoy their breakfast and discuss last night's antics. They are, in essence, playing themselves in precisely the same constructed corner of the film studio in which their selves, just moments ago, were the actors in a simulated advertising spot, the inexistent "product" of which remains entirely beside the point.

Yet, to play themselves is also to embody their roles as The Players, fictional characters in a circumscribed, cinematic world. As if to reinforce this triple interpenetration of advertising space, the space of cinematic fiction, and the space of middle-class everyday life (itself in no small way over-determined by received cultural forms), the film will intersperse several additional low-angle shots of the Fallen Angels up in the galleries, peering down once again towards a camera that may or may not occupy the languid domestic idyll in the kitchen from which they ostensibly have been spurned. Nearly five minutes will pass before the sunny music of the "spot" kicks in again, this time as a non-diegetic soundtrack to the brief montage that will conclude the sequence, comprised of more swirling hand-held shots of The Players as they clear the table and abandon the kitchen at last.

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The Players and the global critical discourse on advertising

Two provisional theses follow from the foregoing observations. For one, the sequence would seem to corroborate our hunch that Luís is less grateful than anguished to find himself yet again in the world he left behind. He is like a groundhog forever doomed to mistake his shadow for reality, his daily life an illusory matrix of representations, all cast before him by the light of an increasingly media-saturated society. What is more, the Fallen Angels, who appear to survey *The Players*' territory with either jealousy or indifference in hopes of reconquering a domain of freedom and leisure their enemies deny them, are in the end equally implicated as mere spectators of a world of illusions they have yet to recognize as such. If these propositions bring the contemporaneous ideas of Guy Debord to mind, I have intended them to do so.

Recall the aphoristic terms that launch *The Society of the Spectacle*:

“In societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles.

[...]

“The spectacle presents itself simultaneously as society itself, as a part of society, and as a means of unification.

[...]

“The spectacle is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images.

[...]

“The spectacle cannot be understood as a mere visual deception produced by mass-media technologies. It is a world-view that has actually been materialised, a view of a world that has become objective.”[29] [[open endnotes in new page](#)]

Without doubt, the aesthetic formulations of Fischerman's film can seem remote from those of Solanas and Getino's, not to mention from Debord's own Situationist films, with which *The Hour of the Furnaces*, as I proposed, shares much in common on the formal level. Yet the *theoretical* foundations of Fischerman's political aesthetics comprehend the spectacular nature of late-60s Argentina in ways so nuanced as to deepen our reading of Debord while perhaps raising questions about the intellectual rigor of Solanas and Getino's Manichaeism.

In any event, even before the distinguishing uses of advertising in *The Players*

come fully to light, one thing is surely clear: they have little to do with the brute *détournement* of existing advertising media lifted from print and televisual sources—as is the case with *The Hour of the Furnaces*. Rather, Fischerman understands advertising discourse as an autonomous and pliable mode of cinematic representation to be interwoven *ad hoc* into the lyrical texture of the work. While both the form and the “content” of the “spot” in *The Players* do seem to parody the bourgeois values typical of television commercials at the time, the critical force of such caricature arguably derives from the formal relations the film establishes between the self-reflexive, pseudo-commercial sequence just discussed and the equally self-reflexive scenes that come just before and after it.

On closer inspection, however, such an assessment taken at face value may rely on the same reductive formalism by which Latin American film historiography, in the name of liberation, has so often justified its dismissal of works like *The Players*. Since its approach to advertising discourse is *only* formal, so the critique would go, Fischerman’s film cannot qualify as a true exemplar of political film practice. Of course, by that criterion, even the belligerent formal gambit of *The Hour of the Furnaces* might provoke suspicion. In the case of *The Players*, to indict its presumed formalism threatens to bypass completely that which gives ballast to its complex formal engagement with advertising discourse. The film’s real radicalism resides precisely in its incisive theoretical grasp of the nexus between mass media, consumer society, political discourse, and everyday life, not only in late-1960s Latin American, but in the 60s broadly construed.

It is thus insufficient to draw conclusions about the relative value of a political-modernist film based on its putative adoption of what merely *appear* to be simulated advertising techniques or styles alone. Indeed, as media historian Lynn Spigel has noted, the connections between avant-garde cinema and advertising aesthetics were no longer hierarchical by the 1960s, but rather bi-lateral and fluid, each discourse ransacking the innovations of the other to various ends and effect.[30] In this regard, it can be useful to identify some of the specific theoretical conceptions of advertising discourse at work beneath the surface of a film like *The Players*.

One might, for instance, begin by turning to the work of Raymond Williams, who in the early seventies had begun to theorize the new kinds of “sequential experience” brought on by new forms of corporate advertising and their effects on television programming. “The insertion of advertisements in unsponsored programmes,” he claimed, “created quite new visual rhythms,” in which “the advertisements are integral” to the total programming sequence, rather than mere interruptions of entertainment segments.[31] Accordingly, we might say *The Players* attempts to resist this constant, numbing flow of rhythmic, sequential information organized around the advertising form. Yet the film does so not by means of what Emilio Bernini calls the “incessant interpellation” and intensified cadences of montage that guide militant documentaries like *The Hour of the Furnaces*, but rather by the cannibalization of modernist reflexive devices to draw attention to the malleability—and hence the instability—of capitalism’s supposedly universal language of persuasion.[32]

Moreover, by interlacing the formal system of its “advertising sequences” with other, largely improvisational dramatic scenes, Fischerman’s film reveals their sequential relation as something wholly divorced from *either* narrative logic or the imperative of persuasion. The resulting “sequential experience” emanates instead from a broader formal principle related to the spectacular nature of everyday life. Hence, as in the sequence described above, when actors effectively linger in the improvisational space produced by their own “commercial without a product” long after the “spot” has ended, that fabricated advertising space persists unaltered as the site of an unscripted, deconstructed slice of domestic life. In this subtle way, *The Players* stages precisely the insidious melding of commercial and private space brought about by advertising. In turn, the film implicates the artifice of advertising discourse *and* avant-garde art alike in their mutual production of everyday life as both alienation and pleasure.

Without doubt, *The Players* understands advertising discourse as both a potent tool of political film practice and an easy target of radical political critique. Yet the film assumes a critical position *vis-à-vis* the political critique. However, the film assumes a critical position *vis-à-vis* the mass media that diverges abruptly from the ideological inflection of films like *The Hour of the Furnaces* that typified 1960s liberation discourse in Latin America. This, surely, must have served as further grounds for the dismissal of *The Players* not only by contemporary activist-artists in Argentina at the time, but by critics and scholars of Latin American political cinema as well.

For Fischerman’s work seemed by and large uninterested in articulating the more orthodox Marxian ideas of prominent Latin Americanist media theorists of the day, thinkers like Armand Mattelart, Juan José Hernández Arregui, and Heriberto Muraro, whose methods of ideological critique and truculent diagnoses of the nefarious bonds between mass communications and neo-colonization found such acute resonance in Solanas and Getino’s work.[33] Rather than cast advertising as a mode of production for which “el pueblo” must fight for control against the pernicious forces of capitalist imperialism, Fischerman’s film strives to empty advertising discourse completely of its persuasive weight. In turn, it augurs an anti-orthodox, post-Marxian conception of mass media akin to the ideas of Jean Baudrillard, for whom the Marxist theory of production was inadequate to that which it excluded, namely those modes of *communication* proper to the superstructure.

Indeed, unlike what we find in the agit-prop tactics of a work like *The Hour of the Furnaces*, *The Players* largely eschews the conventional morphology of “the pitch” with which the so-called “System” has endowed advertising discourse. In both cases, however, the ostensible purpose is to resist re-appropriation by the “System” in question.[43] As for Baudrillard, whose book *The System of Objects* appeared around the time that both Fischerman and Solanas and Getino were making their films, he likely would have gone a step further, surmising in the incessant *détournement* of advertising images in political documentaries like *The Hour of the Furnaces* the very means by which such works end up constituting fetish objects of consumption in themselves, precisely because they adopt wholesale, rather than alter or reject outright, the capitalist structures of advertising discourse as such. To

Baudrillard in 1968, advertising discourse was nothing but “pure connotation” incapable of production *per se*. Instead, its role in the “system of objects” came from the dual status of the advertisement as form and concept, that is, as both a “discourse *on* the [advertised] object and *as* an object [of consumption] in its own right.”[35]

Advertising discourse so construed operates on the order of myth, much as Roland Barthes had theorized it a decade earlier by positing a “*second-order semiological system*” or “*metalanguage*” through which the *form* naturalizes the *concept*, and history (or ideology) is thereby reconstituted as universal, inevitable, common-sense.[36] Writing for the journal *Utopie* not long after the publication of *The System of Objects*, Baudrillard would radically amplify Barthes’s semiological thesis by positing advertising discourse not merely as a meta-linguistic form that naturalizes its ideological content, but also as a “model of signification” wholly independent of any political or ideological content whatsoever.[37]

In Argentina, meanwhile, and in terms that would have resonated with Baudrillard’s, avant-garde films like Fischerman’s were formulating a critical film discourse aimed at challenging the very terms by which Third Cinema seemed to be “understanding the media” of advertising. Specifically, in its peculiar deployment of advertising form, *The Players* presages Baudrillard’s claim that “to believe in a critical reversal of the media” is “a strategic illusion.”[38] In other words, *détournement* is futile. This, I sense, is the critique that Fischerman’s particular “uses of advertising” secretly levy against the political aesthetics of Solanas and Getino. That is to say, *The Players* suggests that any work of political art claiming simply to turn the System’s own tools against themselves is likely to wind up reproducing the very ideology of communication proper to the (capitalist, neo-colonial) System in question. Better to sap advertising discourse of its persuasive force by diluting it in a suspension of multiple, simultaneous discourses: fictional, cinematic, quotidian, and political.

In this light, some might see in *The Players* a more prescient intimation of the true nature of television advertising on the horizon already at the dawn of the seventies. Insofar as it comprehends advertising discourse neither as a revolutionary means of toppling the System by the System’s own methods nor as a way to sell revolutionary ideology, Fischerman’s film arguably aspires to revolutionize the techniques of advertising themselves—to change advertising discourse fundamentally—by depriving ads of usefulness or more precisely by depriving the medium of its message, its exchange-value. In other words, *The Players* endeavors to eviscerate advertising form of its dominant ideological content by rendering the advertisement as an unpersuasive form unto itself, entirely useless beyond its specific, structural situation in the cinematic work onto which it has been grafted as just another form.

This is not to say that the medium becomes the message in *The Players*, but rather that the medium is pure medium, devoid of message, wielded neither as an interruption of spectatorial pleasure nor as the anchor of any new late-capitalist “visual rhythm.” The pseudo-spots in Fischerman’s film are formulated as essentially anti-capitalist devices, not in a rhetorical sense so

much as a structural one. Their radical force derives from the entire procession or matrix of cinematic forms in relation to which they dynamically if precariously stand. Just as crucial, the advertising segments in *The Players* forge a radically critical relationship to the film's implied spectator, whose status as a consumer is subverted by the simultaneous presence of advertising forms and absence of discrete cinematic "advertisement-objects," so seamlessly are they blended into the over-arching narrative formlessness of the film.

In the end, it is perhaps this notion of the spectator that has sealed the historiographical fate of enigmatic works like *The Players*. In the fraught historical epoch of its production, Fischerman's film was seen to lack a sufficiently revolutionary politics. Yet what more likely consigned the film to oblivion was the specific brand of revolutionary violence it perpetrated on its audience. To be sure, *The Players* aspired to change drastically the dominant system of (advertising) communication in Latin America at the time. In the final analysis, however, the film largely dispensed with its public, opting instead to wield its strategic failure to communicate as a revolutionary objective unto itself. In this regard, Fischerman's project conveyed precisely the iconoclasm of his coreligionists in and beyond the *Group of 5*, as artists who strove above all to proclaim their radical autonomy from all the competing political positions in play throughout the Argentine Sixties.[39]

To be sure, neither *The Players* nor *The Hour of the Furnaces* ever succeeded in altering the nature of film spectatorship in any lasting way. Admittedly, that was always the paramount if most elusive goal of every revolutionary political cinema in 1960s Latin America. But one thing is certain: it is Solanas and Getino's documentary and not Fischerman's feature that Latin American film discourse since the 60s has affirmed as a legitimate work of political-modernist art. Not surprisingly, *The Hour of the Furnaces* today stands as an especially enduring object of academic consumption. For better or worse, scholars and critics have mainly left *The Players* vs. *Fallen Angels* alone. It endures, in turn, as a work still radically un beholden to those who would somehow re-vindicate its version of political modernism if not, at the very least, its critique of advertising discourse.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes

1. This essay develops research from two earlier papers, one delivered at the 2010 annual conference of the Society of Cinema and Media Studies, the other presented at the Fourth Annual Conference of the Andrew W. Mellon Postdoctoral Fellowship in the Humanities, University of California, Los Angeles, February 11-12, 2010. [[return to page 1](#)]

2. The other members were Ricardo Becher, Raúl de la Torre, Alberto Néstor Paternostro, and Juan José Stagnaro, none of whose contemporaneous films attained the formal (and political) audacity of *The Players*. In hindsight, Fischerman's work was in more intimate dialogue with other filmmakers who operated even farther to the margins of Argentine cinema at the time, among them Julio Ludueña, Miguel Bejo, Edgardo Cozarinsky, and Rafael Filippelli. Néstor Tirri discusses these connections in the only book-length work to date dedicated to Fischerman's cohort. See Néstor Tirri, comp., *El Grupo de los 5 y sus contemporáneos. Pioneros del cine independiente en la Argentina (1968-1975)* (Buenos Aires: Secretaría de Cultura GobBsAs, 2000), 87-100. Since drafting the original version of this article, I have encountered David Oubiña's compelling monograph, *El silencio y sus bordes: modos de lo extremo en la literatura y el cine* (Mexico, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2011), an unaltered version of his 2005 doctoral thesis, in which he devotes an extensive chapter to Fischerman's work. Also signaling Fischerman's greater affinity with those other artists outside the *Group of 5*, Oubiña frames *The Players* as one of a small corpus of unrepeatable limit-works of narrative art from Argentina at the turn of the 1970s, meanwhile situating Fischerman's larger concerns firmly within a matrix of global critical discourses, from political-modernist film theory and the Adorno of *The Dialectics of Enlightenment* to theories and practices of the *happening*.

3. Diana Sorensen, *A Turbulent Decade Remembered: Scenes from the Latin American 60s*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2007), 17.

4. On the now unproblematic designation of the 60s as a "long decade" (roughly, from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s), see Fredric Jameson, "Periodizing the 60s," *Social Text* 9/10, *The 60's without Apology* (Spring-Summer, 1984): 178-209; and, more recently, Arthur Marwick, *The 60s: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c.1958-c.1974* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). Implicit in Jameson's original formulation is a geographic component that locates the origins of the global 60s outside the industrialized West, that is to say, in the third world, or more precisely, in the former colonies of Great Britain and France, where the first

national liberation movements erupted. Nonetheless, still earlier manifestations of this global moment arguably come from Japan, where Left-revolutionary, “anti-imperialist” student movements began with opposition to the first U.S.-Japan Security Treaty of 1950 and spanned the entire decade to follow. See Victor Koschmann, “Intellectuals and Politics,” in *Postwar Japan as History*, ed. Andrew Gordon (Berkeley: University of California, 1993), 395-423.

5. Although its purview does not extend to cases beyond Europe and North America, the definitive critique of the discourse of political modernism, particularly in its articulation of the conflict between “the aesthetic” and “the political” in post-1968 avant-garde film theory and practice, remains D. N. Rodowick, *The Crisis of Political Modernism: Criticism and Ideology in Contemporary Film Theory*, 1st pbk. ed. (Berkeley: University of California, 1994). The seminal theoretical statement on “the two avant-gardes” in modernist film discourse is Peter Wollen, “The Two Avant-Gardes,” *Studio International* 190.978 (November/December 1975): 171–175. Here Wollen traces the opposition to competing tendencies of self-reflexive formalism (mainly in North American experimental film) and narrative anti-illusionism (mainly in the European tradition leading from Eisenstein to Godard), before heralding a potential “third avant-garde” that would effectively merge the two orientations. Not coincidentally—though without referring explicitly to Wollen’s essay of five years earlier—Robert Stam would discern just such an amalgamation in Solanas and Getino’s 1968 documentary. See Robert Stam, “*The Hour of the Furnaces* and the Two Avant-gardes,” in *The Social Documentary in Latin America*, ed. Julianne Burton (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1990) 251-66, originally printed in *Millennium Film Journal* 7-9 (Fall-Winter 1980-81).

6. A project unto itself is needed to adequately redress the long-standing pan-continental bias of scholarship on 1960s Latin American film in this regard. A cursory review of the scholarly literature on the New Latin American Cinema itself, however, is instructive. To begin, one of the principle anthologies of studies on the New Latin American Cinema succinctly epitomizes the contradictions in the competing titles of its two volumes: see Michael T. Martin, ed., *New Latin American Cinema*, Vol. 1: *Theory, Practice and Transcontinental Articulations* (Detroit: Wayne State UP 1997), and Vol. 2: *Studies of National Cinemas* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1997). Numerous other key sources on the New Latin American Cinema are equally susceptible to the seductions of this (elusive) pan-continental ideal in the analysis of 1960s Latin American cinema. In addition to Burton’s edited volume, cited above, see also Michael Chanan, ed. *Twenty-five Years of the New Latin American Cinema* (London: BFI, 1983); Julianne Burton, ed. *Cinema and Social Change in Latin America: Conversations with Filmmakers* (Austin: University of Texas, 1986); and Zuzana M. Pick, *The New Latin American Cinema: A Continental Project*, Texas Film Studies Series (Austin: Texas UP 1993).

7. Solanas and Getino in no way propose that First and Second Cinema somehow cease to operate with the ideological evolution of film history towards Third Cinema. Rather, they find all three operating simultaneously

and dialectically within the historical conjuncture of national liberation. The document (originally titled “Hacia un tercer cine”) has been reprinted in various publications, including Michael T. Martin, *New Latin American Cinema*, Vol. 1, 59-61. The Spanish text is included in *Hojas de cine: testimonios y documentos del Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano*, Consejo Nacional de Recursos para la Atención de la Juventud (Puebla, México: Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, 1986). The concerted revision and expansion of the theory of Third Cinema commenced with Teshome Gabriel, *Third Cinema in the Third World: The Cinema of Liberation* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1982), and arguably culminated with Jim Pines and Paul Willemen, eds., *Questions of Third Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1989). On Third Cinema discourse in the Latin American context specifically, see Octavio Getino and Susana Velleggia, *El cine de las historias de la revolución. Aproximaciones a las teorías y prácticas del cine político en América Latina (1967-1977)* (Buenos Aires: Grupo Editor Altamira, 2002). Insofar as it represents the film-discursive counterpart to the discourse of liberation in the Latin American 60s, it bears comprehending Third Cinema as just one of an array of transnational Latin Americanisms at the time, viz., Dependency Theory, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Liberation Theology, the New Latin American Novel (a.k.a. the *Boom*).

8. In subsequent writings, Getino was in fact quite explicit about the expressly national objectives of his collaboration with Solanas. Specifically, within the parameters of the film collective they founded, Grupo Cine Liberación, Solanas and Getino regarded their artistic activity as nothing short of the cultural arm of Revolutionary Peronism, the broader militant political movement that dominated the opposition to the right-wing military regime in Argentina at the time. See Octavio Getino, *A diez años de “Hacia un tercer cine”* (México, D.F.: Filmoteca de la UNAM, 1982) 5-35. On the crucial role of Grupo Cine Liberación in the Left-Peronist movement in Argentina at the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 70s, see Mariano Mestman, “Raros e inéditos del grupo Cine Liberación. A 40 años de *La hora de los hornos*,” *Revista Sociedad* 27 (primavera 2008): 25-79. However abundant the scholarship on Peronism, it bears underscoring the deeply problematic association of Perón’s own political ideas with those of Left-Revolutionary ideology in 1960s Argentina, which took its inspiration mainly from the Marxist-Leninist orientation of the Cuban Revolution. Perón was by and large a realist who forged alliances across the political spectrum, and whose corporatist “third way” between the extremes of the Cold War often embraced starkly contradictory political positions. Important analyses of Peronism include Ernesto Laclau, “Towards a Theory of Populism,” in *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism-Fascism-Populism* (London: NLB, Humanities Press, 1977) 143-98; Tulio Halperin Donghi, “El lugar del peronismo en la tradición política argentina,” and Mariano Ben Plotkin, “La ‘ideología’ de Perón: continuidades y rupturas,” both in *Perón, del exilio al poder*, ed. Samuel Amaral and Mariano Plotkin (Buenos Aires: Cántaro, 1993) 15-44, 45-67; Ricardo Sidicaro, *Los tres peronismos. Estado y poder económico, 1945-55/1973-76/1989-99* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2005); and Loris Zanatta, *Breve historia del peronismo clásico*, trad. Carlos Catroppi, Serie Nudos de la historia argentina (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 2009).

9. Until recently, the principal industrial history of advertising in Argentina was Armando Alonso Piñeiro, *Breve historia de la publicidad argentina 1801-1974* (Buenos Aires: Alzamore Editores, 1974) For a new, more nuanced critical study of the rise of consumer culture in post-war Argentina and, subsequently, of the evolution of commercial advertising, see Natalia Milanesio, *Workers Go Shopping in Argentina: the Rise of Popular Consumer Culture* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 2013), especially chapter 3, “Commercial Culture Becomes Popular: Advertising and the Challenges of a Changing Market,” 83-122.

10. One fairly recent exception to this oversight is Laura Podalsky, “La hora de los hornos in the Advertising Age,” in *Specular City: Transforming Culture, Consumption, and Space in Buenos Aires, 1955-1973* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2002), 208-227. While Podalsky’s stated aim is to historically situate the “critique of consumerism” in Solanas and Getino’s documentary “against the backdrop of the contemporary Argentine advertising industry,” it must be noted that her account neither attempts to compare the effective uses of “advertising techniques” in *The Hour of the Furnaces* with those found in actual advertising spots from the period, nor ventures to relate the film’s putative advertising aesthetics to the broader critical discourse on advertising taking shape both within and beyond Latin America at the time. I will bring greater attention to this discursive constellation below.

11. César Maranghello, “Alberto Fischerman, el hombre que sabía escuchar,” in Tirri, *El Grupo de los 5*, 25.

12. For all its merit, Podalsky’s analysis in the aforementioned chapter of *Specular City* is symptomatic of this kind of omission: while she addresses Solanas’s vocation as a factor in the adoption of what she perceives as advertising strategies in *The Hour of the Furnaces*, she disregards the political contradictions that result from his professional association with the very advertising world his film denounces.

13. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 1964, Introd. Lewis H. Lapham (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), especially chapter 23, “Ads: Keeping Upset with the Joneses,” 226-33. To today’s reader, McLuhan’s pronouncements on advertising—“a self-liquidating form of community entertainment” with the “goal of a programmed harmony among all human impulses and aspirations and endeavors”—can sound frankly oracular. Certainly, to judge not only by the ubiquity and uniformity of advertising imagery across the contemporary media landscape (even in the case of images made merely to *look* like high-production advertisements), not to mention the ubiquitous *iconicity* of that advertising imagery, according to which any reference to an actual product has long since become extraneous to the objective of the ad, McLuhan’s insights may now sound more clairvoyant than ever. As I hope to suggest, the way Fischerman’s *The Players vs. Ángeles Caídos* understands advertising media imparts a similar prescience, perhaps to the same degree that Solanas and Getino’s critique of mass media can now look and sound somewhat dated.

14. The scholarly literature on this period of Argentine history is vast. My

severely schematic overview here relies mainly on Hugo Vezzetti, *Sobre la violencia revolucionaria. Memorias y olvidos* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI Editores, 2009); and Boris Fausto and Fernando J. Devoto, *Brasil e Argentina: um ensaio de história comparada (1850-2000)*, trans. of Spanish texts by Sérgio Molina (São Paulo: Editora 34, 2004), especially chapter 3, “A construção dos dois populismos e sua crise (1937-1968),” 332-93; and chapter 4, “Ditadura, democratização e o tempo mais recente (1968-2002),” 395-453.

15. My schematic discussion of the Di Tella Institute here relies mainly on two sources. First is the now classic history of the organization by John King, *El Di Tella, y el desarrollo cultural argentino en la década del sesenta*, 1985, 2nd ed. (Buenos Aires: Asunto Impreso Ediciones, 2007). Though eminently useful as a historical reconstruction of a crucial hub of cultural production, King’s is a mostly acquiescent, linear account of the Institute’s activities through the 1960s, based primarily on archival documents. Farther-reaching in its purview and more circumspect in its analytical stance is Andrea Giunta, *Vanguardia, internacionalismo y política: arte argentina de los años sesenta*, edición ampliada (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI Editores, 2008), which aims to situate organizations like the Di Tella within a broader nexus of global cultural phenomena during this complex chapter of Argentine art history.

16. The commercial can be viewed on-line, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=HsxDECDB-f8, last accessed 12/4/14.】

17. *Con un poco de arena / con un poco de mar / si tu estás a mi lado / ya no quiero más*. [This and all subsequent translations of non-English sources are mine unless otherwise noted.]

18. The investigation of Erize’s case—which culminated in July 2009 with the conviction of those responsible for her sequestration, rape, and murder—has gained considerable attention in the Argentine press. See, for instance Juan C. Poblete Barrios, “Tres hombres secuestraron a la joven,” *La Nación*, Aug. 9, 2000, accessed Oct. 14, 2013, www.lanacion.com.ar/28108-tres-hombres-secuestraron-a-la-joven; , Miriam Walter, “Procesaron a Menéndez por el asesinato de Marie Anne Erize,” *Diario de Cuyo*, July 25, 2009, accessed Oct 26, 2013, www.diariodecuyo.com.ar/home/new_noticia.php?noticia_id=354184; and Daniel Tejada, “El retrato íntimo de Marie Anne,” *Tiempo de San Juan*, Sept. 29, 2012, accessed Oct. 25, 2013, www.tiempodesanjuan.com/notas/2012/9/29/retrato-intimo-marie-anne-18342.asp.

19. Edgardo Cozarinsky, “The Players vs. Ángeles Caídos,” *Primera Plana* (June 1969), reprinted in Tirri, *El Grupo de los 5*, 76. [[return to page 2](#)]

20. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 1974, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 384-85. One may also detect in *The Players* certain anarchist tendencies that resonate with aspects of Lefebvre’s thought. Though he never assumed the mantle of anarchism for himself, Lefebvre’s sympathies with anarchist philosophy are well-known. See Andy Merrifield, *Henri Lefebvre: A Critical Introduction* (New York & Oxford: Routledge, 2006), xxiv-xxv; 175n13. Responding to speculations over his anarchist predilections, Lefebvre famously confessed to Edward Soja in 1978 that he

was “a Marxist, of course...so that we can all be anarchists some time in the future.” See Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-And-Imagined Places* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 33.

21. As so many critics have commented, the film is a *tour de force* of avant-garde film techniques—though I must side with Gonzalo Aguilar in asserting that none was truly innovative any more by 1969. Rather, the film’s radical status resides in its rejection not only of hegemonic industrial modes of cinematic production, but of the entire institution of commercial cinema itself. See Gonzalo Aguilar, “*La hora de los hornos*: historia de su recepción,” in *Cine argentino: Modernidad y vanguardias 1957/1983*, Vol. II, ed. Claudio España (Buenos Aires: Fondo Nacional de las Artes, 2005) 496.

22. This, in essence, is how Podalsky characterizes the deployment of advertising aesthetics in *The Hour of the Furnaces*: a tactical means of turning the language of “the System” against itself. In a similar vein, Robert Stam makes brief mention of advertising as one of many aesthetic strategies of persuasion and demystification in the film, though he refers mainly to the film’s re-appropriation of advertising images from commercial print media. See Stam, “*The Hour of the Furnaces* and the Two Avant-gardes,” in Burton, *The Social Documentary in Latin America*, 253. As I remark below, Emilio Bernini has addressed similar questions of advertising style and media appropriation in *The Hour of the Furnaces* with considerably greater depth and complexity. See Emilio Bernini, “Politics and the Documentary Film in Argentina,” *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 13.2 (August 2004): 155-170.

23. Cited in Beatriz Sarlo, “La noche de las cámaras despiertas,” *La máquina cultural: maestras, traductores y vanguardias*, Colección Los Tres Mundos (Buenos Aires: Seix Barral, 2007) 183.

24. For the first formal theoretical statement on *détournement*, see Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman, “Mode d’emploi du détournement,” in Guy Debord, *Oeuvres*, ed. Jean-Louis Rancón with Alice Debord, pref. and introd. Vincent Kaufmann (Paris: Gallimard, 2006) 221-29, first printed in *Les Lèvres nues* 8 (May 1956). To my knowledge, no one has yet drawn the connection between the techniques of appropriation in *The Hour of the Furnaces*—themselves inspired by the work of Cuban director Santiago Álvarez at the Instituto Cubano de Artes e Industrias Cinematográficas (ICAIC) beginning in 1959—and the methods of *détournement* in Situationist cinema. Guy Debord’s short film, *Critique de la séparation*, dates from 1961, and already contains the basic elements of *détournement*, though it would only be with the 1973 film “adaptation” of his 1967 tract, *La société du spectacle*, that the method would find its full expression. In this sense, both Álvarez’s films and *The Hour of the Furnaces* prefigure *Society of the Spectacle* as a work of cinematic *détournement*.

25. Beatriz Sarlo, “La noche de las cámaras despiertas,” in *La máquina cultural*, 189.

26. This counterpoint, it should be noted, does not result from conventional parallel montage, a narrative strategy that Fischerman resisted categorically

in *The Players* (yet another of the factors distancing him from his *Group of 5* peers). Both Oubiña and Rafael Filippelli stress this point. See Filippelli, “Una combinación fugaz y excepcional: el Grupo de los 5,” in Tirri, *El Grupo de los 5*, 20; and Oubiña, *El silencio y sus bordes*, 147.

27. *Yo me encuentro al despertar / con el mundo que dejé: / con mi cuarto, con mi chica / con mi tasa de café....*

28. *Hoy me levante alegre / porque alegre me acosté. / Mi amor se durmió conmigo / yo me desperté con él / La-da-da-da-da-da-dum, [...] / Si me duermo, llego tarde. / Si me visto, tarde es. / Si hago el amor llego tarde / pero llegaré muy bien.*

29. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 1967, trans. Ken Knabb (London: Rebel Press, nd), 7. The four cited passages come from chapter 1, “The Culmination of Separation,” sections 1, 3, 4, and 5, respectively.] [[return to page 3](#)]

30. Lyn Spiegel, *TV by Design: Modern Art and the Rise of Network Television* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 243-44.

31. Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), 68-69.

32. Emilio Bernini, “Politics and the Documentary Film in Argentina,” 163-64.

33. Indeed, as articulated in the first part of *The Hour of the Furnaces*, Solanas and Getino’s critique of “neo-colonization” in Latin America by means of the mass media is tightly aligned with the ideas of such intellectuals. See, in particular, Juan José Hernández Arregui, *Imperialismo y cultura: la política en la inteligencia argentina* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Amerindia, 1957), which the filmmakers cite in both *The Hour of the Furnaces* and in “Towards a Third Cinema”; and Hernández Arregui, *Nacionalismo y liberación: metrópolis y colonias en la era del imperialismo* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Hachea, 1969). See also, Armand Mattelart, *La comunicación masiva en el proceso de liberación* (México: Siglo XXI Editores, 1973); and Heriberto Muraro, *Neocapitalismo y comunicación de masa* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Universitaria de Buenos Aires, 1974).

34. That the first formulations of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari on the Capitalist “machine” also date to this period is no coincidence. I refer specifically to their postulation of the “Body without Organs” as that virtual dimension of Capitalism—a kind of matrix of potentialities or flows of desire—that continually “reterritorializes” the various forms of surplus, aberration, or resistance that Capitalist society itself engenders. See Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 1972, Vol. 1 of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane, pref. Michel Foucault (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1983), especially the sections titled “The Body without Organs,” 9-16; and “The Civilized Capitalist Machine,” 222-240

35. Jean Baudrillard, *System of Objects*, 1968 (London: Verso, 2005), 178 (my emphasis).

36. Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," in *Mythologies*, 1957, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972) 114; 115; 129.

37. Jean Baudrillard, "Requiem for the Media," in *Utopia Deferred: Writings for Utopie (1967-78)*, trans. Stuart Kendall (New York: Semiotext(e), 2006) 83.

38. Baudrillard, "Requiem for the Media," in *Utopia Deferred*, 84.

39. "Éramos... militantes del 'partido cinematográfico'" ("We were... militants in the Party of Cinema"). Bebe Kamin and Julio Ludueña in conversation with Néstor Tirri, in Tirri, "Alianzas Contestatarias (Ludueña, Bejo, Cozarinsky)," *El Grupo de los 5 y sus contemporáneos*, 100.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The film as essay: Jafar Panahi's search for self in *This is Not a Film*

by [Bebe Nodjomi](#)



Panahi talking to his friend Mirtahmasb over the phone while eating breakfast.



Opening title card: This is Not a Film.



"Dad, listen, I turned the camera on, and placed it on the chair."

If it is only the capacity to choose that allows one to protest his social unfreedom, then what becomes of an individual who chooses to do what he/she is restrained from doing? How can a filmmaker define himself as anything but a filmmaker? Just two years after the election debacle of 2009, we find Iran's cinema hyper-consciously aware of inner turmoil, unrest, and social anxiety within the state.

While it became evident that a sense of common purpose, a sense of community no longer exists within the state, Iranian cinema shortly thereafter begins to fork off into different directions. Following Abbas Kiarostami's departure from Iran (shooting *Certified Copy* in Italy and later *Like Someone in Love* in Japan), filmmakers Asghar Farhadi and Jafar Panahi simultaneously bring two films to the table. Although both filmed in Iran, one outshone the other. As *A Separation* took the Oscar for best foreign film, showcasing the country as humanely as possible, its counterpart, *This is Not a Film*, represents the true bleak state of art and politics. A meditation on self-discovery under the hand of oppression, Panahi's film essay attempts to explore what it means to be a filmmaker who cannot create films anymore.

In the summer of 2009, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad ran for reelection against the progressive opposition candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi. Iranians were sure that Mousavi would win with ease, but two hours before the polls closed, the government declared a landslide victory in Ahmadinejad's favor. Pouring into the streets, donning various shades of green (Mousavi's campaign color), Iranians protested and chanted, "Where is my vote?" and "Death to the dictator!" Western media was barred from entering Iran and Iranians took images and videos of the protests into their own hands. What we saw was a violent backlash from the government towards its people.

Panahi was arrested in 2010 for what continues to be a vague charge against his filmmaking. We can only assume that the charges against his films are actually directed towards his affiliations with the Green Movement, the uprising that sprouted from the 2009 election debacle. At the Montreal World Film Festival he was pictured wearing a green scarf around his neck flashing the peace sign (a symbol Mousavi often posed with). Back in Iran, he attended Neda Agha Soltan's funeral, an innocent



The camera acts merely as a prop.



Rekindling his friendship with his daughter's pet iguana, Igi.



Speaking on the phone with his lawyer about the charges against him.



bystander killed during the protests whose face had become the emblem of the Green Movement. Since such actions could be considered anti-regime, it is safe to assume that Panahi's arrest is more linked to his political activities than simply his filmmaking.

Nonetheless, his filmmaking became an easy target, as we see in *This is Not a Film* when Panahi makes note of several films he had planned on creating that were never approved by the ministry. After being put in prison, Panahi went on a hunger strike until he was released upon \$200,000 bail and subject to house arrest. Upon his imprisonment, he stated (towards the government),

"You are putting me on trial for making a film that, at the time of the arrest, was only thirty percent shot. If these charges are true, you are putting not only us on trial but the socially conscious, humanistic and artistic Iranian cinema as well, which tries to stay beyond good and evil, a cinema that does not judge or surrender to power or money, but tries to honestly reflect a realistic image of the society" (King, *LA Times*).

Pahani was sentenced to six years in prison with a twenty-year ban on filmmaking, screenwriting, and attending any international cinema functions. His voice muted...or so we thought.

He goes on to state,

"I am staying in my country and I like to work in my own country. I love my country, I have paid a price for this love too, and I am willing to pay again if necessary" (King, *LA Times*).

He proceeds to do just that. Flash-forward to a year later: we watch him eating breakfast in the home he's been confined to as he calls his documentarian friend Mojtaba Mirtahmasb to come pay him a visit. After this introduction, the film's (or should I say "film") opening title card gives us a solid foundation: This is Not a Film. If what we're watching, in a traditional sense is not a "film" then what can we define this moving image as? Many critics have dubbed *This is Not a Film* simply as a "nonfilm" or have gone onto praise Panahi's political gesture as the culmination of what has developed into a great film, or some have simply left the question of the work's nature unanswered. I want argue though, that as this film derives from a combination of what Bill Nichols has coined as the social issue documentary and the personal portrait documentary, it actually coalesces to form a new type of essay film.

We can classify the political documentary as having either a social issue narrative or a personal portrait narrative, and while *This is not a Film* fits simultaneously into both tendencies, it can't fully be defined by either category. Nichols further explains,

"Social issue documentary might seem to go with the expository mode and an earlier moment in documentary, whereas personal portraiture might seem to go with observational or participatory modes and contemporary debates about the politics of identity" (243, 2010).

The former might rely more on rhetoric and content while the latter will focus more on style and personal perspective. Although there is no question that *This is Not a Film* fits more appropriately into the personal portrait documentary, I believe that because Panahi and his friend

Panahi explains to Mirtahmasb what he would like do...



...He wants to tell his unmade film, create an image of what the film would have been.



Panahi says "cut" to Mirtahmasb, but his friend reminds him he's not a director anymore. This fact finally dawns upon Panahi.



The iguana grazes about.

Mirtahmasb are vocally expressive about whether or not what they are documenting will constitute as a film, their conversation shifts this work into the form of an essay.

This is Not a Film opens with the camera functioning merely as a prop. There is no "filmmaking" involved. His son left the camera. It's there on a chair, facing Panahi's bedroom. His family calls, we see the phone in the distance, but Panahi doesn't enter frame to pick it up. His son leaves a message on the answering machine stating,

"Dad, listen. I turned the camera on, and placed it on the chair. I just think there isn't much charge left in it. The battery might run out."

Panahi momentarily pops his head out of the master bathroom to see the camera facing him. After he puts on his jeans, he's about to leave the room when he rather reluctantly turns back to take the camera with him, carrying it by his side. Judging by this gesture and the quality, we can assume it's a standard HD-formatted documentary camera. Panahi simply moves the camera from one room to another, placing it atop a surface, at a distance, never quite acknowledging its presence, indifferent to its existence. He's left with his only companion, his daughter's pet iguana Igi. He washes Igi's food and attempts to reconcile his friendship with Igi, "Here. Eat and let's make up," he says, as he tries feeding the lizard. The iguana ignores him; Panahi annoyed, gives up with the stubborn creature and changes the camera setup.

He sits at a table drinking tea as the camera focuses on him in a medium close-up. He makes a telephone call to his lawyer, questioning what exactly has come of his appeal. She says that the twenty-year ban on filmmaking, scriptwriting, or discussion on film in a foreign country will likely remain. However, she is hopeful that his sentence to prison will be reduced. We then notice that Mirtahmasb must have arrived, as the camera becomes mobile, following Panahi's actions as he begins to talk to the camera, looking both directly at the camera and the figure we presume who's holding it. Panahi explains what he would like to attempt to do: read his unmade film. "I might create an image of it perhaps," he says. He could try to have the audience envision a film, the film that was only 30% complete at the time of his arrest, by reading the script and telling the action and setting of the film.

Now the irony behind Mirtahmasb's future project cannot remain unnoticed, as he had indeed planned on creating a documentary about the world behind-the-scenes of Iranian filmmakers not making films. Panahi calls upon Mirtahmasb to be his fellow documenter. He believes the vision of his film could be better conveyed with a mobile camera than the static shot a tripod gives. As Panahi is searching to find himself in this moment, under house arrest, without the ability to partake in filmmaking, he is projecting his innermost thoughts outwardly. In his dialogue with Mirtahmasb, Panahi's private self, through the act of documentation, is projected then as a public self. Filming the thought process as a form of personal expression, Panahi makes audiences start to question what type of a "film" this work actually is. We can take into consideration the pun and nod in reference to René Magritte's painting *The Treachery of Images*, where a painting of a pipe is captioned in French, "This is not a pipe," hinting rather that this is a *drawing* of a pipe and not the object-in-itself. Similarly both *This is not a Film* and "This is not a pipe" force viewers to rethink and rework what the image is representing. *This is not a Film*,



Igi wants Panahi's attention...



...Igi crawls on top of him.



Best friends.

however, particularizes and questions filmmaking and the film mode.

The essay film tends to blur modes of filmmaking and searches for a new mode. Often times, the unclassifiable nature of film essays leads to a misunderstanding of their perplexing intended goal. Timothy Corrigan attempts to resolve these complications in his book, *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker*. Corrigan notes that the very power and point of the essay film comes from its “anti aesthetic status,” that what makes these films so unique comes from the film form’s ambiguity (4, 2011). Many of Corrigan’s thoughts and theories will be relevant for exploring and understanding a film like Panahi’s. Throughout *This is Not a Film*, Panahi’s actions and intentions are seemingly clear, but as the process continues he becomes more aware of just how unsure he is of his product. Not only is the nature of the film at odds, but Panahi is also discovering how to create a new self, a new identity under the sanctions of the Islamic Republic. Corrigan states that the essayistic subject projects

“an interior self into an exterior instrumental world...[taking] an expressive self to a public domain as a form of experience that continually tests and undoes the limits and capacities of that self through that experience...demanding both a loss of self and the rethinking and remaking of the self” (17, 2011).

With an identity crisis looming, Panahi sets his plan for telling his film, and double checks with his cohort whether or not acting or reading his screenplay were counted in the assaults.

Throughout the film Panahi and his friend are both unsure of whether or not this exercise will actually become anything, let alone a film. Mirtahmasb continually expresses his unease with acting and telling as film-related activities that could potentially hurt Panahi in the long run. Panahi says “cut” to Mirtahmasb at one point, but Mirtahmasb keeps filming. Panahi, a little taken aback asks him why he didn’t cut. But his friend responds by reminding him that he’s not allowed to direct, that Panahi should read his script aloud and Mirtahmasb will simply follow him. This is Panahi searching on how *not* to be a director. We can tell that the act of directing has become something innate, second nature to him. In talking to the camera, telling, explaining his film, speaking to Mirtahmasb about his circumstances, interacting with his small cast of nonhuman characters (Igi and a dog Micky), he is, at best, writing (or filming) an essay.

While Panahi’s work describes a story of sorts, it is more so what some might call a video-essay. It is Panahi’s response to the government; it is conveying his frustrations as he tackles his frustrations. He is not directing but efficiently showing through one day’s work, a day in the life of a filmmaker under the Islamic State’s internal exile. “Chaharshanbe Suri” or what translates in the West as, “Fireworks Wednesday,” is a day of rejuvenation before the New Year, where people celebrate the coming of spring. Families visit each other; people bang pots and pans, stopping at houses like U.S. Halloween; and small bonfires are hopped over as acts of purification. The general atmosphere is lively, optimistic, warm—inviting the New Year’s potential. The juxtaposition between Panahi roaming about

his house idly against the backdrop of a joyous communal holiday such as Fireworks Wednesday seems like an all too perfect setup.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Mapping out the room of his main character.



Panahi reads his script and acts as the main female protagonist of his would-be film.



"If we could tell a film, then why make a film?"

Iranians are out celebrating, enjoying themselves and Panahi is left home alone with a mammoth-sized iguana. The two graze about the apartment together. Panahi attempts to rekindle his friendship with Igi. Igi crawls on to Panahi's chest. Igi retreats away behind the bookshelves. While these moments come off as dull, they stress the nature of being encaged for a twelve to fourteen hour day. Moreover, they actually turn out to be some of the most entertaining parts of the film. Panahi and Mirtahmasb utilize humor to their advantage, underlining how absurd a man trapped in his house feels. They depict how much the government equates Panahi with an animal, so like his own pet iguana stuck in his cage. These moments, though, make the film more comedic than sad. Instead of feeling remorse about his circumstances, feeling sorry for him, or pitying him, we end up laughing.

A refuge, a way to poke fun at the situation, laughter invokes hope that maybe this is all just one sad elongated joke. For him to paint a portrait that encourages us to laugh in the darkest of moments portrays his brave outlook, his willingness to cope within the state's terms and conditions, so long as he can continue living in Iran. Laughter acts as a force against oppression, and happiness becomes a form of stealthy freedom. When Panahi attempts to finally tell the story of his planned film, we discover it's about a girl who's accepted to an arts university but restricted from attending because of strict traditional parents, and consequently caged in her room by them. Sounds similar to someone we know...

To act out his future script for us, Panahi constructs a makeshift set out of tape in the corner of his lavish rug. The rug as a whole represents the girl's entire house. He lays long strips of yellow-colored tape to indicate the particular room where the action of his script would have taken place. It looks similar to a child mapping out territory, marking off where his designated space would be. He places himself within the girl's "room," where he had hoped his character would be. He uses a pillow as a stand-in bed and a chair to indicate the window she longingly stares out of.

He begins reading the script, acting in place for both the mother and the daughter arguing, explaining emotions and movements, but midway through, after he confronts a crucial scene of the girl's potential suicide, he stops. If one cannot do what one loves, then why exist? "If we could tell a film, then why make a film?" Panahi says before briskly walking off his own set. Panahi's frustrations are well conveyed. As he tosses himself onto the "bed" "crying" as a girl, we can see how his fantasy of creating such an image for an audience deteriorates. It's almost as though we are watching a rather disturbing portrait of a grown man playing dress-up, that is how different "telling" a film is from creating a film.

While he identifies with his lead female character and places himself in her position, in the end, he is not the girl. He is Jafar Panahi, a man whose identity is created by filmmaking. We watch him lie on the floor, playing pretend, an action that culminates in his loss of selfhood. We find him not only identifying with the female character of his would-be film but also



Panahi idly films with his iPhone.



Irony. As Panahi watches homes wash adrift, he is stuck in his own home under house arrest.



Mirtahmasb exclaims how important it is to document, that from the moment he set foot in jail, he should have started filming.



The two are unsure of whether or not this could turn into a film.

reflecting upon his past work, particularly *Mirror* which stars another young female nonactor. He says he's stuck in the same situation Mina had been in—forced into acting as someone she (or he) is not. While she's supposed to act as if she's lost her way home, she stops, stares into the camera and yells she knows the real way home and doesn't want to act anymore. Panahi too wants to stop telling, explaining his story and become who he knows he is: a filmmaker.

By relating to female characters in Iranian Cinema, he equates himself with a minority or a marginalized oppressed group in society. By doing this he deconstructs power structures that exist in Iranian society and attempts, in one way or another, to wipe out boundaries between man and woman. We could also say, he is searching on how to be, what I would call, a “nondirector.” Not quite like the “nonactors” Panahi admires, the “nondirector” has knowledge of the craft of directing, but temporarily displaces this status for his actions to be warranted as acceptable “film activity” under the constraint of a certain mandate, in this case, to abide by the Islamic courts. The unease of having to be someone he is not allows him to refer back to his own work in retrospect, to a time he was in control as a director. He relinquishes his control to Mirtahmasb and as a “nondirector” turns into the subject, instead of the established figure he is known to be.

When discussing conceptions of the self, Corrigan quotes Georg Lukacs’ “On the Nature and Form of the Essay,”

“The essayist becomes conscious of his own self, must find himself and build something out of himself” (22, 2011).

As Panahi looks back retroactively to a time he had authority as a director, he's now experiencing a plight of power. This “shifting and disembodied” self has left him powerless and we can see the camera develop as a symbol of assertion. The nonactor, like Mina for example, is more comfortable in being herself, not as an actor. The nondirector, though is uneasy until he can reassert himself as a director. As we constantly see Panahi filming idly with his iPhone, it is a fellow visitor who later helps him regain this sense of self, telling him the professional camera is over there.

Corrigan later goes on to say that essayistic subjectivity refers to an individual's

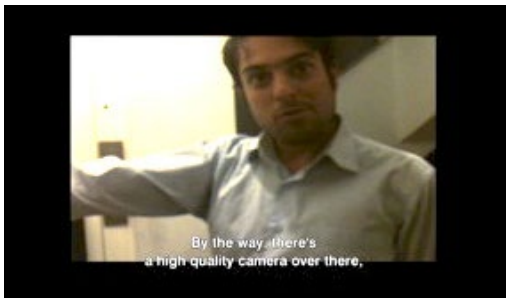
“active and assertive consciousness that tests, undoes, or re-creates itself through experience, including the experiences of memory, argument, active desire, and reflective thinking. Embedded within the textual action of the film, the essayistic subject becomes the product of changing experimental expressions rather than simply the producer of expressions” (31, 2011).

So we see Panahi actively talking and discussing his circumstances, but of course never openly demeaning or speaking ill of the government. He reflects both upon himself and the world around him. Panahi turns the television on only to watch as hundreds of homes are being swept away by the tsunami that devastated Japan in 2011. It is a discreet but sly insert, as if to say (which he does not verbally),

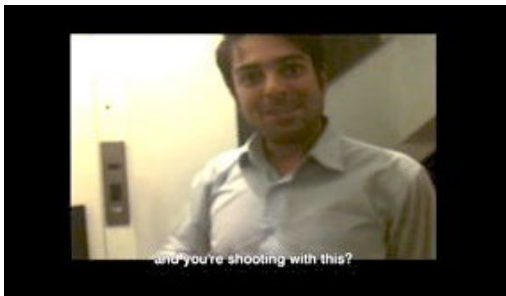
“Although I’m under house arrest at least I’m lucky enough to have a home, even if I’m held captive.”)



Mirtahmasb believes the cameras, no matter the quality, should remain ON. He encourages his Panahi to continue filming.



Panahi runs into a stranger, a student turned trash-collector...



The student knows of Panahi's status and wonders why a director like himself is filming on an iPhone...

As Mirtahmasb continues to film the banality of Panahi's Fireworks Wednesday, checking the Internet, shooing Igi off of him, watching Igi make his way into a bookshelf, Mirtahmasb notes that he doesn't know exactly how dependable the footage that he shot will be. The makers themselves are unsure of their product's "filmicness" as I would call it. After all as we watched Panahi reflect on his previous works, a film is incomplete without his usual nontraditional actors. A film to Panahi is location, nonactors, lights, camera, not the setup he had earlier with a tripod. Even bringing Mirtahmasb in as his documentarian assistant doesn't make this experiment more filmic. Corrigan explains, "essays" are actually "attempts," "tries," or "tests" (15, 2011). When Panahi stops filming with his iPhone, the deep reassuring voice we've identified as Mirtahmasb encourages him to film on. Panahi's lost self slowly seems to resurrect itself within the closing fifteen minutes of his essay. He continues to film Mirtahmasb with his iPhone, "When hair dressers get bored they cut each other's hair," Mirtahmasb says jokingly. When he leaves he states, "What matters is that the camera stays ON, the main thing is to document."

Documenting, as a political act, needs to be tightly thought out in Iran. As Nichols states about social nature of documentary,

"The work of some filmmakers questioned the ideology of a singular national character and a transcendental national purpose. They sought radical change more than social amelioration" (226, 2010).

However, is such an idyllic notion of social change even possible in Iran? Can a film of self-exploration like this act as a marker for social change? If the film had to be smuggled *out* of the country, on a flash drive, inside of a cake, if the film could only, at first, be seen by an outside public, people who would be relatively ineffective against Iran's government, then why make such a film? What does this search for Panahi's selfhood even constitute in the end? What is the point in watching him drink tea and figure out what to do if no one will be able to do anything in return? This essayistic act of taking something private and putting it out into the public sphere is a way for individuals all around the world to see that although one Iranian filmmaker has made a grand unprecedented leap for his country, this triumph should not disillusion us about the state of other filmmakers like Panahi, or now Mirtahmasb.

In the end of it all, he searches for an adventure with a newfound friend, who, as I mentioned earlier, asserts, "The professional camera is over there. I have an iPhone, everyone has an iPhone, could you make a film with that?" This question repeats itself throughout—what is the mode of a film, what can a film be made with? If Panahi had since been simply making an essay of his conditions, then does he transform into the director once he journeys down the elevator with the Master's student? The trash-collector for Panahi's apartment complex drops by to pick up the director's trash just as Mirtahmasb is leaving. We come to find out that the "trash-collector" just so happens to be obtaining his Master's student degree (seems like the job prospects for Master's students are looking great).

As persuaded by this nameless Master's student, Panahi swaps his low-quality iPhone for the high quality film camera. The student is impressed by the status that comes with it, straightening his shirt, evidently worried



He states that the camera for a director is on the table, hinting to him to pick it up.



At last, we see Panahi resurrecting his craft.



The two journey down the elevator together.

about how his appearance will be translated through this hi-def lens. Panahi asks him his real occupation besides collecting the neighbors' trash and the student says he's studying Arts Research. Intrigued by his new subject Panahi decides to follow suit down eight floors to film the trash-collecting student. For each floor they stop at, Panahi continues to ask the stranger about his life. He's surprised because he believes he's never seen the man before but the student talks to him with respect, admiration, and assurance that they have indeed met before. Panahi questions why he's not working in his own field and the student replies by explaining that his area of study doesn't ensure a daily nine to five job. Rather he takes work in his field when he can and works on the side to fund his education with odd jobs, like working in a textile factory, being a bike courier, taxi driver...He reminds us of the dissatisfied youth, who account for about 70% of the population, unemployed, had hit the streets as part of the Green Movement in 2009. Sometimes there will be work, and sometimes there won't be. Sounds similar to someone we know...

At last, Panahi identifies himself with a male nonactor and picks up the camera to again take on the brief role of director. Although, the student keeps trying to recount the night of Panahi's arrest, we never come to hear the whole story. References are made until the very last second when we hope to finally find out what happened that night to Panahi, but the story is never fully explained to us. And maybe that is the point. What is the point in recounting the past if it has not been documented? After all Mirtahmasb says, "What's important is to document." That the day he had been captured and sent to prison, he should have started filming. The "document" is what matters. While we understand Panahi's circumstance, what needs to be "documented" is a picture, a visual image. Panahi covered by an Iguana. Panahi in the middle of a makeshift set. Panahi dealing (or not dealing) with his neighbor's irritating dog. This may all seem like fun and games to a certain degree of comedic undertone, a sort of play-acting with his cast of actors: Igi, Micky, Mirtahmasb, but how long can a man endure such conditions? This essay becomes a Sisyphian smile in the face of absurdity. It is as close to filmmaking as Panahi can get.



Intertitles:
The worst thing is that you graduate with a master's degree and/
then there's no job for you.



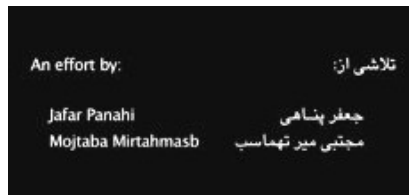
The nameless graduate student can symbolize hundreds of youths in Iran that account for 70% of the population, most of whom have been out of work.

When Panahi introduces us to this Master's student, we are unsure of its spontaneity, unsure of his response, "You're making an actor out of me." We are tossed back into typical Panahi territory; we are taking a trip with a



Panahi encaged.

nonactor. Thus, does this last scene finalize *This is Not a Film* as a film? If, the film's ending actually fits Panahi's definition of a film, a good camera a good protagonist, has this crossed the line? I think what answers this question is our final image of a gate closing off fires from Fireworks Wednesday. Although he's ready to walk to the fire, cross out of the gates, he does not. There is a renowned Persian tragedy by Ferdowsi that tells the story of Siavash, a man wrongly accused, crossing into fire to prove his innocence. Panahi stays within territory. He doesn't pass into the fire, he holds the camera, a prop, and cuts to the closing title cards. He dubs his product, "An Effort by Jafar Panahi & Mojtaba Mirahmasb." This ends all questions. Is it a film? Is it a nonfilm? It's an effort, which is what defines an essay. It's an attempt to revive his voice. If no one can speak on Panahi's behalf, then who better to make the effort? As much as he wants to cross the fire into justice, come out pure, untouched like Siavash, he remains back, behind the gates, in captivity. He dedicates his efforts to Iranian Filmmakers, a bittersweet reminder that to film is better than having never filmed at all.



"An effort by..."



"Dedicated to..."

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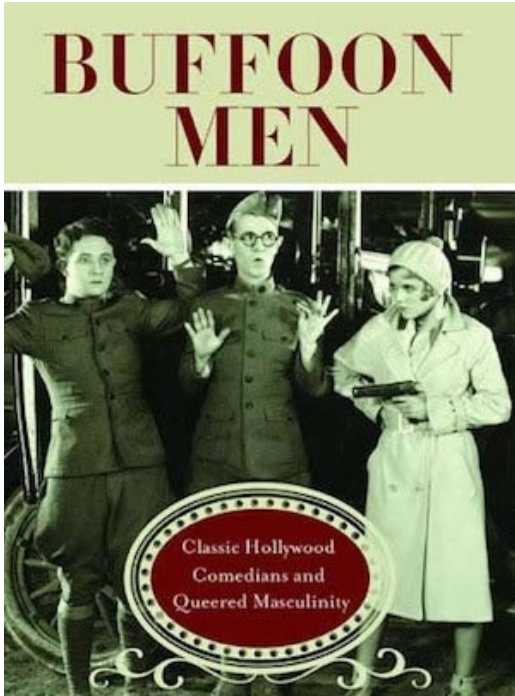
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Buffoon queers

review by Andrew J. Douglas



Scott Balcerzak argues that several film comedians of the 1930s and 1940s, such as Bert Wheeler and Robert Woolsey (pictured) perform a particular type of queered masculinity that renders them “buffoon men.”

Scott Balcerzak, *Buffoon Men: Classic Hollywood Comedians and Queered Masculinity* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013). 258 pages.

In applying gender and queer theory—primarily through the work of Alexander Doty and Judith Butler—as well as Freudian psychoanalysis, to his exploration of the careers of Hollywood comedians of the early sound era who do not often receive such intellectual treatment, Scott Balcerzak, in *Buffoon Men*, offers cultural context and scholarly underpinning for the sources and specific nature of the masculinity these men performed. W.C. Fields, both with and without Mae West, Eddie Cantor, Jack Benny, Laurel and Hardy, Wheeler and Woolsey, and Abbott and Costello serve as case studies for his particular take on queered masculinity that he identifies as “buffoonish masculinity.”

Gender scholars will find the application of queer theory and Freud to these particular comedians interesting, and academics familiar with comedy studies will gain from viewing these specific performers through the critical lens of gender analysis. Yet, much of this ground has been trod before, albeit sometimes while focusing on other stars, by a number of scholars, including Kathleen Rowe Karlyn, Susan Murray, Neil Schmitz, and Virginia Wright Wexman, among others.[1][[open endnotes in new window](#)] However, Balcerzak contributes to the discourse in his use of Doty’s approach to queerness, his focused incorporation of Freud, and his detailed discussions of select stars, some of which have not previously been the subjects of such close readings.

Balcerzak suggests that in some cases these buffoon men are not straight because their films have other characters, played by more conventional men, who embody the more traditional role and execute the usual duties of leading man, and that on the occasions when the comedian tries, he is unable to successfully woo his intended. But is it a stretch to call the absence (or failure) of the romantic pursuit of a woman a “queered masculinity”? Balcerzak makes clear that he is borrowing Doty’s definition of queerness, which he relays as,

“a quality related to any expression that can be marked as contra-, non-, or anti-straight.”[2]

This seems a perilously broad definition on which to base so many focused readings of performers who clearly and routinely utilize, as comedians have from time immemorial, the tropes of status change, including the switching and subverting of traditional gender roles, and incongruity, a staple of which is drag. From this perspective, I think one would be hard pressed to find a star of this genre that is not a buffoon man, in which case the usefulness of the term is not readily apparent. This question is raised again in Balcerzak’s conclusion, which ends with a discussion of Tina Fey, Kristen Wiig, and other comediennees who qualify as buffoon women, risking further dilution of the term.



Buffoon Men covers a good bit of familiar ground, as several scholars have looked at comedic performance through the lens of gender studies, including Kathleen Rowe Karlyn in her 1995 book, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*, which examined humor, excess, and spectacle in the work of comedienne ranging from Mae West to Roseanne.



Milton Berle (here with Bob Hope), who is not discussed in *Buffoon Men*, is but one example of the long tradition of cross-dressing — by both men and women — for comedic ends, an effective practice due to its inherent subversion of expectations and changing of social status.

Furthermore, there is something reductive about defining masculinity—even the narrow yet hyperbolic masculinity of the Hollywood screen—as the (successful) pursuit of a female romantic/sexual partner. Certainly, such romance is a significant element of many screen masculinities, but it is also treated as incidental, or a formality, in many films within a number of genres in addition to comedy—gangster and western pictures for example—that are not known for their queered masculinities. This disinterest in the opposite sex could be seen as a way of avoiding the misogyny that many, including Balcerzak, see permeating these comedies, as well as the industry producing them.

Or it, and the other transgressions against women, might be part and parcel of the immaturity and/or child-like nature ingrained in the performances of other comedians, including Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle, Jackie Gleason, and Chris Farley. Their characters’ behaviors toward women often could be more accurately described as pre-female rather than anti-female; asexual, not aggressively heterosexual. For example, despite the many threats he makes toward Alice, Ralph Kramden, in large part because of his (and Gleason’s) weight, comes across less like an abusive spouse and more like a boy on the playground having a tantrum because he is confused by his new, unfamiliar feelings for a female classmate and is powerless to act productively on them. Might the same be said of W.C. Fields, whose performance in *My Little Chickadee* is, as Balcerzak accurately explains, “by its very nature, absurd in its fragile declaration of power?”[3]

It is this film and the intersections between gender, performance, sexuality, and drag that co-stars Fields and Mae West provide that are the topic of *Buffoon Men*’s first chapter. Its contextual ground is a little too fertile to be tilled effectively, and the requisite inclusion of Ramona Curry’s work on West and Judith Butler’s explorations of gender and drag performance, as well as excursions into Joan Riviere’s and Mary Ann Doane’s work on feminine masquerade and a visit from Freud, take the section a little far afield. Yet, the argument serves to emphasize the performative nature of gender, and Balcerzak uses West’s unique version of femininity to put Fields’s take on masculinity in stark relief.



Kristen Wiig and Tina Fey, seen here in *Date Night* (2010), are mentioned as “buffoon women” in the book’s conclusion, suggesting a categorical breadth that risks minimizing the concept’s usefulness.



A Fistful of Dollars (1964), like many films in the western, gangster, and other genres, has a protagonist who does not pursue a romantic/sexual partner and does not seem to embody a queered masculinity. This raises a question about Balcerzak’s assertion that one of the queer aspects of “buffoon men” is that they do not typically chase after women.

Buffoon Men becomes more focused as the author moves to the second chapter, a consideration of the comedian’s solo career instructively divided along the lines of the two primary masculine types Fields portrayed: the con man and the husband. The former is explored through readings of *Poppy* (1936) and *The Old Fashioned Way* (1934), and the latter through *It’s a Gift* (1934) and *Man on the Flying Trapeze* (1935). Balcerzak argues that both roles are buffoons, responding to

“changes in perception toward maleness that occurred between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century. This is a phenomenon historians often called the *crisis of masculinity*, a label suggesting that white males felt their phallic power slipping away, thus there existed on overcompensation of manly identities.”[4]

In discussing Fields’s con-man roles, Balcerzak identifies the characters’ fear of patriarchy, resistance to feminization, avoidance of the domestic sphere, and lack of athletic/physical prowess. For this last attribute, he refers to a failed attempt at juggling by the actor’s character in *The Old Fashioned Way* and acknowledges the similarities between this scenario and the frequent challenges with inanimate objects that confront many silent comedians in countless films. The author cites Buster Keaton as a contrasting performer who, it is implied, reacts to such problems by remaining calm and ultimately figuring out a way to master the task at hand, or succeed in achieving his goal in some other way. Conversely, in similar scenarios, Fields

“adopts an aggressive tone as he loses more and more dignity, an act exemplifying his queering of masculine performance.”[5]

While I generally agree with Balcerzak’s assessment of Keaton (though his early work with Roscoe Arbuckle may complicate things) and have no quarrel with his reading of Fields, I do question the assertion, left unexplained, that aggression and resultant loss of dignity indicate a wholly queered masculinity. By this, I mean that while the masculine trajectory described is familiar enough—think Jackie Gleason and Chris Farley (and possibly some men you know, on occasion)—I don’t see how it represents a queered masculinity. I think we can all agree that the absence of physical prowess argues against a depiction of traditional masculinity, but the impatience, belligerence in the face of embarrassment, and escalating frustration that lead to the loss of dignity are quite conventional in actual men and some Hollywood versions of them. Personal observation at least suggests an alternative to the exclusively misogynist brush with which Balcerzak seems to paint these performers.

The author provides a useful sketch of the history of male comedians deriving



In his films, Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle, seen here in a frame from “*The Knockout*” (1914), performs a common type of comedic masculinity. He has a disinterest in or mild aggression toward females that does not originate in conventional misogyny but in an immaturity or infantilism more pre-sexual than anti-woman. Balcerzak combines disinterest in, fear of, and unfamiliarity with women with genuine hostility toward women under the umbrella of misogyny. That oversimplifies the gender issues at work.



Along these lines, as this image from *The Honeymooners* illustrates, Ralph Kramden's bluster comes across more akin to a child's tantrum than a bully's serious threat (in large part, I would argue, because of his weight). From her expression Alice shows she's not afraid of her husband.



Balcerzak acknowledges the flimsiness of such comedic masculinities in a portion of his discussion of W.C. Fields, seen here sucking up to Mae West in *My Little Chickadee* (1940).

comedy from the imagined horrors of married/family life, and he situates Fields's husband roles within some roughly contemporaneous changes to the societal view of masculinity. But here, as in the earlier section on Fields, Balcerzak's analysis is too heavily filtered through the lenses of misogyny, sexuality, and Freud. Given that there is such a long and continuing tradition of using marriage as an object of comedic scorn, that such problematic views and depictions of women were rampant and still exist (within media and without), and that Freud's limitations are well known, just how instructive is this approach? This issue is exemplified by the author's focus on what he views as elements of implied incest in *Man on the Flying Trapeze* (1935).

In that film, Ambrose (Fields) is stuck in an unhappy marriage to a woman described as "stereotypically shrewish and domineering," in a household that also includes her uptight mother and spoiled son.[6] Ambrose's daughter from his first marriage, Hope (Mary Brian), lives there as well, and she is her father's only defender and source of comfort, in part because he only married into this family to provide a mother for her. Balcerzak asserts that Hope is "a type of surrogate mistress for Fields, as she emotionally fulfills the function usually supplied by an extramarital affair in a story of marital unhappiness," and that their relationship "remains idealized and substantially more intimate than the marital relationship." [7]

Of course it does, since the marriage has been depicted as woefully and comically terrible. Leaving aside that the hallmark of most extramarital affairs is not emotional fulfillment, Hope facilitates her father's contentment with behavior that is decidedly asexual and well within the realm of reasonable familial expectations. Balcerzak cites as evidence of the incestuous relationship that Hope bails Ambrose out of prison, drives him to work, is his staunch ally against all comers, and does not have a suitor, as daughters often do in domestic comedies.[8] Such behavior hardly suggests the taboo relationship the author asserts, especially in the era in which the film is made, when a child's sense of obligation to her parent was far different than it is today. Sometimes a dutiful daughter is just a dutiful daughter.

Another complication is that Balcerzak does not seem to acknowledge the difference, among comic performers/characters, between a "comedian" and a "clown," as explained by Henry Jenkins and Kristine Karnick, among others.[9] Comedians are characters who are struggling to fit into the society in which they find themselves. Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, in most of their features, are examples. Conversely, a clown's comedy is derived from "disruptions and transgressions arising from a desire to break free from constraint," and such a performer "maintains a highly stylized acting style which marks (his) separation from the larger social order." [10] Jackie Gleason in *The Honeymooners*, John Belushi as Bluto in *Animal House* and as other characters, Chris Farley (in just about everything), and, I would submit, W.C. Fields fall into the latter category. If "clown" is the appropriate label for Fields, then his railing against marriage and domesticity is rooted in a powerful and elemental, though generic, desire to get free of all restraints at least as much as it is in any sort of gender-defined



West's overly defined femininity provides a striking contrast to Fields's fragile masculinity in this production still from *My Little Chickadee*.



Ambrose (W.C. Fields) and Hope (Mary Brian) have a traditional, caring father-daughter relationship in *Man on the Flying Trapeze* (1935), despite the assertions of incestuous undertones made in *Buffoon Men*.

struggle. Balcerzak mentions something along these lines when he references Frank Krutnik's notion of considering comedians in terms of disruption and containment, difference and conformity, but that is as far as he goes.[11]

Balcerzak takes on the buffoon man as nebbish in his study of Eddie Cantor and offers an interesting discussion of the actor's film work and the various modes of racial and ethnic identity that he consistently negotiated, initially leaning on Henry Jenkins's discussion of the comedian in *What Made Pistachio Nuts?* He then moves on to Sander Gilman's work in *The Jew's Body* (1991) and *Freud, Race, and Gender* (1993), and Richard Dyer's *White* (1997) when considering Cantor's activism as a Jew, its impact on his performance persona, and the extent to which it expedited his on-screen de-Semitization, a common process in the industry at the time. Balcerzak's Freudian analysis of scenes from some of Cantor's films supports the notion of the feminized Jewish comedian, but when the author wades into the waters of circumcision, phallic lack, and anal penetration, I was left wondering if the Gentile audience that necessitated Cantor's de-Semitization would have had enough familiarity with Jewish tradition to even wonder about circumcision, let alone its symbolic ramifications.

The author then moves on to films like *Roman Scandals* (1933) and *Kid Millions* (1934), in which he suggests Cantor plays the "every nebbish" of no particular ethnicity, though how this character type differs from the earlier ethnic/Jewish nebbishes is not made clear. The subsequent section on Cantor's blackface performances is among the most instructive in the book, concisely discussing a number of aspects of the problematic trope, including the differences between Cantor's and Al Jolson's depictions, and bringing in W.T. Lhamon Jr.'s consideration of it as a "lore cycle." [12]

Balcerzak begins his discussion of Jack Benny by emphasizing the comedian's differences from the other performers in *Buffoon Men*. Benny is distinguished by his rise to considerable stardom, in the 1930s through the medium of radio, which presents disembodied voices and broadcasts to families and individuals in their home rather than to larger groups in public venues. Radio also utilizes the series format, which in Benny's case, the author points out, morphed over time from something akin to the vaudeville shows of prior decades to a program more closely resembling the sitcoms that would come to populate television.

He then moves into a more specific discussion of Benny's on-air persona, the obnoxious, pompous skinflint for which he was best known. Balcerzak states that the consistent and convincing way Benny portrayed this personality was unprecedented. He asserts that

"it is difficult to think of an entertainer who more actively set himself up to public degradation for comedy." [13]



A routine falls short for Fields in *The Old Fashioned Way* (1934). Frustration in the face of failure characterizes a range of masculinities, both on screen and off.



Chris Farley in the opening moments of *Tommy Boy* (1995). He's the type identified as a "clown" by Henry Jenkins and Kristine Karnick, among others, because he exhibits a "desire to break free from constraint."



John Belushi, who played Bluto in *Animal House* (1978), is another "clown" whose approach to comedy differs from that of "comedians" like Chaplin and Keaton who strive to blend into society.

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Eddie Cantor, seen here in *Palmy Days* (1931), was, as Balcerzak explains, subjected to on-screen de-Semitization, a common (and often self-inflicted) practice in the Hollywood of this era.



Production still is from *Roman Scandals* (1933). Here Cantor leaves behind his role as ethnic/Jewish nebbish to play more of an “every nebbish.” Balcerzak does not sufficiently explain the differences between these character types, and I could not discern any (other than the period garb).



As this lobby card for *Roman Scandals* conveys, Cantor appears in blackface in the film. Balcerzak does a fine job of dissecting this mode of performance, in part by considering W.T. Lhamon Jr.’s concept of the “lore cycle.”



Balcerzak suggests that Jack Benny is a “buffoon man” in part because he usually played an unflattering character named “Jack Benny,” and was subjected to the humiliating conflation of his personal and professional lives. Here we see Benny’s supposed feud with Fred Allen, in the middle of which Mary Martin finds herself in this picture.



Of course, Jack Benny was not the first comedian to play a character identified as, or assumed to be, himself. Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle, not to mention Harold Lloyd, Buster Keaton, and, to a large degree, Charlie Chaplin, did so as well.

I think, though it is not explicitly stated, that Balcerzak means that because Jack Benny is playing “Jack Benny” as a man with these attributes, the star is, more so than other comedians, subjecting himself to ridicule. While this may be the case, I think the author is too quick to discount Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle and other stars of his era whom frequently exhibited foolish or embarrassing behavior on screen. They often either played characters that shared their name or were defined very generically, as Arbuckle, Harold Lloyd, and Buster Keaton often did. Other performers, like Charlie Chaplin, played characters like the Tramp that, to the public, became interchangeable with the performer.

The rest of the Benny chapter applies some concepts from Michelle Hilmes’s *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (1997) and Doty’s *Making*



Fatty Arbuckle playing himself.

Things Perfectly Queer (1993), which has a section focused on the comedian, to Benny's radio show and the movies that were spun off from it in 1940, *Buck Benny Rides Again* and *Love Thy Neighbor*. It then concludes with brief looks at the subsequent movies, not related to his broadcast work, in which Benny appeared, including Ernst Lubitsch's *To Be or Not To Be* (1942).

Balcerzak's chapter on Laurel and Hardy, and the international appreciation society they inspired, named after *Sons of the Desert* (1933), begins with an overview of the duo's career and their approach to humor, which utilizes the familiar outsider position—a tactic exploited by the other comedians in the book—and also sets up a dynamic as an incongruous pair. And this is another tactic covered in *Buffoon Men*, seen in Martin and Lewis, Gleason and Carney, or (Chris) Farley and (David) Spade.

Where Laurel and Hardy do differ, Balcerzak asserts, is in their being

“the most overtly queer of the on-screen buddies in that they represent a queered unit as opposed to contrasting sexual identities, a sexual dynamic found in most other comedy duos.”[14][[open endnotes in new window](#)]

Balcerzak focuses here on *Sons of the Desert* as a “comic affront to the parameters of homosocial male brotherhood—*queering the fraternity*,” that also

“explores the sexualized dynamics of male-male companionship as a more successful pairing than each comedian's respective heterosexual marriage.”[15]

Balcerzak positions the club itself among other instances of participatory culture, and suggests that since there is “undeniably . . . something queer about Laurel and Hardy,” there must also be in the “long-held fan obsession over the duo.”[16]

While it is hard to refute there's something “queer” about Laurel and Hardy (and their society, for that matter) if one is using the book's theoretical application of the term, the author supports his case with instructive references to Steven Cohan's discussion of Hope and Crosby and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's work.[17] Balcerzak also insightfully elucidates attributes that Laurel and Hardy do not share with other duos, such as the pair's lack of one member that queers the other through a (hetero)sexual imbalance that exists between them, as exemplified by Jerry Lewis's high-pitched, awkward, and hysterical performance contrasting with Dean Martin's smooth, confident, and seductive take on conventional masculinity. He suggests this identifies Laurel and Hardy as a “queered unit,” as well as a pair that had a longer, more prolific, and more harmonious run than any other comedy duo.[18]

Balcerzak explains that Laurel and Hardy “denaturalize the homo/heterosexual binary through a disruption of the social institutions promoting its limited conception of sexuality,”[19] which is one of the reasons a discussion of the fraternal order they inspired is so relevant to his reading of the duo. In lampooning such organizations in the film *Sons of the Desert*, the comedy team is critiquing a substantial element of nineteenth and early twentieth century



According to Balcerzak, Laurel and Hardy are “the most overtly queer of the on-screen buddies” and form a “queered unit” because of the lack of contrasts — in areas other than temperament and physicality, one assumes — between the individuals.



Balcerzak asserts that in many comedy duos, such as Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, there is a considerable gulf in heterosexual prowess that further individualizes each man, precluding the formation of a “queered unit.”



Laurel and Hardy (in 1934's *The Live Ghost*), it would seem, have no such gulf.



In *Sons of the Desert* (1933), Laurel and Hardy are lampooning the fraternal organizations that were important in defining the working- and middle-class masculinity of the era.

culture, argues the author, because working and middle class men were participating in labor unions, religious organizations, sporting clubs, political groups, and professional organizations to a degree they had not before and, I would add, no longer do.

More so than other such organizations, the fraternal lodges, like the one depicted in the film, are “all-male social spaces designed explicitly to promote a supposed brotherhood,” states Balcerzak, in which “we find the most peculiarly ritualistic celebration of rank-and-file maleness.”[20] Balcerzak explores this realm by reviewing a history of such organizations and the scholarship about them, and by viewing them through the lenses of Freud and George Chauncey’s *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (1994), among other texts.

Buffoon Men’s final chapter is dedicated to the military comedies of Abbott and Costello and to the duo the author sees as their most direct forerunners, Bert Wheeler and Robert Woolsey, who reached their pinnacle in RKO pictures of the 1930s. As he does throughout, Balcerzak begins with a brief overview of the history of the performers and their work, in this case situating Abbott and Costello’s *Buck Privates* (1941) and other films among the rash of military comedies that would come out in 1941 and continuing during World War II. He then elucidates the similarities between the two duos, including their reliance on “joke-based routines,” and contrasts them with Laurel and Hardy. He writes:

“Abbott and Costello adopt many of the basics of Freudian aggression and degradation that grounds buffoonish masculinity as a genre staple. Unlike the other duos mentioned thus far, the aggressor is the straight man who consistently attacks or, at least, humiliates the comedian as victim, providing a differentiation from the ‘queered unit’ found with Laurel and Hardy.”[21]

While the hostility and occasional violence that Costello exhibits toward Abbott considerably exceeds the aggression in the relationship between Oliver Hardy and Stan Laurel, a similar dynamic clearly exists. Whether it is Hardy exclaiming, “Well, here’s another nice mess you’ve gotten me into,” or shoving Laurel for procrastinating during their efforts to sell Christmas trees in “Big Business” (1929), both comic duos often have the more substantial member of the pair abusing his smaller counterpart for comic effect. However, the duos come from different eras, with their differences in film length, use of sound, and approach to narrative, as well as their sub-genres—slapstick vs. more joke-reliant humor. Such differences make direct comparison difficult, but because the author successfully analyzes key aspects of the two duos’ performance of masculinity that are similar, this for me is enough to raise questions about Balcerzak’s identification of Laurel and Hardy as a uniquely “queered unit.”

Returning to Abbott and Costello, the author situates them among the more conventional masculinities and conservative films in the years leading up to the war. He makes reference to *From Chivalry to Terrorism* (2003) by Leo Braudy and Joshua S. Goldstein’s *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa* (2001) for the former, and Thomas Doherty’s *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II* (1999) as well as *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits, and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies* by Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black (1987). In so doing, he makes the important point that having a sense of the shifting masculinities and evolving perspective on the necessity of the war are essential to understanding changes to the public’s conception of the soldier, which in turn will necessarily impact how the military can be mined for comedy. Here, again, Balcerzak returns to the notion that the men in movie audiences felt inadequate in comparison to Hollywood’s idealized masculinity as



Abbott and Costello's *Buck Privates* (1941), given the proximity of its production and release to U.S. participation in World War II, does not show the duo in combat and mocks their incompetence, while the Army itself escapes unscathed.



Lee Bowman romances Jane Frazee in *Buck Privates*, exemplifying Balcerzak's point about assigning the romantic duties of the protagonist to the "straight" lead, leaving the "buffoon men" free for more hijinks.



Wheeler and Woolsey's *Half Shot at Sunrise* (1930), being released in the middle of the interregnum between the world wars, takes aim at the institution of the U.S. Army itself, viewing it as a fraternal organization worthy of ridicule, similar to the eponymous order in Laurel and Hardy's *Sons of the Desert*.

embodied, for example, by Gary Cooper in *Sergeant York* (1941), but could more readily identify with the buffoonish masculinity of the comedians who enlisted on screen.

To some degree, this formulation presumes that viewers do not prefer the aspirational or admirable traits in their stars, but rather a sense of mere adequacy or superiority. There is not much in the history of movie stars to suggest this is the case, though admittedly the latter feelings are in line with a current of populism that runs through U.S. culture from time to time. One thing is certain—scant adequacy and a sense of superiority are common ingredients in comedy, and as such cannot be claimed solely by these buffoon men. Given this, in trying to flesh out the characteristics of this type of masculinity, it might be more effective to compare these comedians to other performers in their genre, rather than to a star like Gary Cooper acting in a war-time drama.

More specifically, *Buck Privates*—like the Marx Brothers films the author discusses in the introduction and some of W.C. Fields's and Eddie Cantor's work—has a narrative split in which there is a main plot with romance and a conventional leading man (in this case, Lee Bowman), and a humorous alternate plot in which the comedians are central. Balcerzak labels them respectively as the "straight" dramatic and the "queered" comedic plots and suggests that this approach makes room for both types of stars discussed in the previous paragraph and their respective masculinities. This arrangement is ideal for pre-war propaganda, Balcerzak argues, because

"maintaining a separate 'straight' and 'queered' maleness creates a fantasy dichotomy, allowing the relatable comedians to be the major selling point to the public while also providing unreal male archetypes to promote military duty." [22]

Wheeler and Woolsey's military comedy, *Half Shot at Sunrise* (1930), takes a different tack, presenting the military as a fraternal organization worthy of ridicule—similar to *Sons of the Desert*—even before the duo arrives on the scene to wreak comedic havoc. This contrasts to *Buck Privates*, where the military is given a respectful and idealized depiction and does not appear as an institutional excuse or "ritualistic façade" for "adolescent sexual games." [23] Abbott and Costello provide plenty of disruption and frivolity but they, rather than the military itself, are the source of the humor. This distinction is a clear result of the films' respective eras with the earlier one coming almost in the middle of the years between the two world wars, and the latter being released after FDR instituted a peacetime draft and months before the attack on Pearl Harbor. Balcerzak notes another key difference: Wheeler and Woolsey see combat in their military film while the comedians in the pictures made near or during wartime do not.

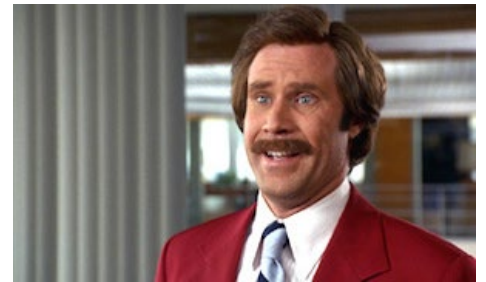
In his introduction, Balcerzak explains that his analytical approach "must be understood as having multiple potentials for challenging the social order," because it

"provides us with a wealth of insights into some of cinema's most popular stars and their cultural significance, both as a historical reality defining a popular cinematic genre and a critical tool for contextualizing the nature of queered gender." [24]

Comedy itself, as discussed in texts ranging from Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* (1965) to Gerald Mast's *The Comic Mind* (1979) to Henry Jenkins's *What Made Pistachio Nuts?* (1992) to Kathleen Rowe Karlyn's *The Unruly Woman* (1995), is predicated on challenging the social order, and the

best of it does so on multiple levels. Balcerzak touches on all of these works—and more—in his brisk but effective review of the genre’s literature and in support of his arguments throughout. But for reasons that remain unclear, he insists on gathering the various acts of boundary-pushing his subjects perform under the critical umbrella of “queering.” In so doing, he risks bending that term beyond its breaking point.

Scott Balcerzak’s *Buffoon Men* is most valuable for the detailed studies of comic performers it contains and the breadth of the historical contexts within which they are situated. Unfortunately, its attempt to gather such a diverse range of comedians under one theoretical rubric, while admirable and ambitious, is ultimately unsuccessful. By the end of the book, particularly after the conclusion that endeavors to bring dozens of notable comics from the last seven decades into the fold, I was left wondering: If every comedian is a buffoon man, is any comedian a buffoon man?



In his conclusion, Balcerzak seems to be making the case that virtually all comedians since the inception of sound cinema—such as every prominent alumnus of *Saturday Night Live*, including Billy Crystal, Eddie Murphy, and Will Ferrell—are “buffoon men, despite their substantive differences in comedic approach, performance style, and subject matter.”

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Notes

1. For some prior considerations of stars through the lenses of comedy, gender, and body theory, please see Kathleen Karlyn's *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (University of Texas Press, 1995), Susan Murray's "Ethnic Masculinity and Early Television's Vaudeo Star" (*Cinema Journal* 42, Fall 2002), Neil Schmitz's "Humor's Body: Jackie Gleason, Roseanne, and Some Others" (*Arizona Quarterly* 56, Summer 2000), Virginia Wright Wexman's "Returning from the Moon: Jackie Gleason, The Carnavalesque, and Television Comedy" (*Journal of Film and Video* 42, no. 2, Winter 1990), and my *The B.M.O.C.—Big Men on Celluloid: Images of Masculine Obesity in Popular American Film and Television* (Northwestern University, 2005). [[return to text](#)]
2. Alexander Doty, (1993): quoted by Balcerzak (2013), p. 6.
3. Balcerzak (2013) p. 49.
4. Balcerzak (2013) p. 59.
5. Balcerzak (2013) p. 68.
6. Balcerzak (2013) p. 72.
7. Balcerzak (2013) p. 74.
8. Balcerzak (2013) p. 74-5.
9. Jenkins, Henry and Karnick, Kristine Brunovska (1995), "Introduction: Acting Funny," in *Classical Hollywood Comedy* (Karnick and Jenkins, eds.). New York, Routledge. p. 156.
- 10 Ibid.
11. Balcerzak (2013) p. 6.
12. Lhamon, W.T., Jr. (1998) *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. p. 70.
13. Balcerzak (2013) p. 118.
14. Balcerzak (2013) p. 143.[[return to text](#)]
15. Ibid.

16. Balcerzak (2013) p. 145.

17. The author references Cohan's essay "Queering the Deal: On the Road with Hope and Crosby" in *Hollywood Comedians: The Film Reader*, edited by Frank Krutnik (2000), as well as Sedgwick's books *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985) and *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990).

18. Balcerzak (2013) p. 147.

19. Balcerzak (2013) p. 148.

20. Balcerzak (2013) p. 151.

21. Balcerzak (2013) p. 171.

22. Balcerzak (2013) p. 178.

23. Balcerzak (2013) p. 179.

24. Balcerzak (2013) p. 8.

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Montgomery Clift, or, the ambiguities

by [David Greven](#)

Elisabetta Girelli, *Montgomery Clift, Queer Star* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014), \$31.95, 248 pp.



The surpassing beauty of Montgomery Clift.

Words fail most of us when it comes to describing the beauty of the Hollywood actor Montgomery Clift, but not Elisabetta Girelli. Her exhilarating and incisive book *Montgomery Clift, Queer Star* makes endless reference to Clift's beauty without once seeming excessive or dull in this register. Clift's beauty was linked not just to his appeal but also to the meanings of his stardom, which are carefully and provocatively analyzed here. Submitting all of his film roles to scrutiny, Girelli argues that Clift was a "queer star," and the author herein claims something much larger and more wide-ranging than homosexual, gay, or even bisexual. Taking the idea of queerness almost to its breaking point, Girelli makes a strong case for re-reading Clift's onscreen relationships with women for their transgressive sexual heat, the implication being that the celebration of Clift as a gay icon has diminished the equally salient matter of his hetero-cinematic relations.



Clift's first movie role, co-starring with John Wayne in Howard Hawks' western *Red River* (1946, released in '48).



Subversive man-boy love, in the purest sense of the phrase, in *The Search* (1948).

While Girelli is persuasive, her argument does bring up some difficult and perhaps incoherent matters in queer theory, namely the broad uses of the term "queer" that have become so broad as to threaten to evacuate the issue of same-sex desire altogether, as I will touch on in below. Luckily, Girelli is equally attentive to and adept at elucidating the extensive homoerotic frisson, appeal, and significance of Clift's screen work and onscreen relationships. Of special distinction here as well are her careful, sustained readings of Clift's films made after his horrific 1956 car accident. As evil fate would have it, that accident had its greatest impact on his surpassingly beautiful face, leaving him, if not disfigured as commonly stated, permanently altered. "Constantly measured



Self-critical Narcissus: Clift analyzing his own performance in *The Heiress* (1949).



Clift's legendary pairing with Elizabeth Taylor in *A Place in the Sun* (1951).

against his former looks, Clift now appeared out of sync with himself; this rupture became part of his total meaning as a star" (6).

Girelli locates her approach to Clift in classical queer theory, drawing heavily on the writings of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (on the multivalent meanings of queerness) and Judith Butler (on gender as a compulsory performance). Given the extent to which queer literary studies has eschewed Sedgwick of late (with a focus on a historical materialism seen as an alternative to the apparently more ominous tone of Sedgwick's work), Girelli's well-chosen uses of Sedgwick here are particularly welcome.

While respectfully noting the contributions of scholars such as Amy Lawrence and Steve Cohan, Girelli argues, "Clift's disruptive screen presence has been narrowly explained, in terms of fixed notions of homosexuality and bisexuality" (11). "Clift's persona is not reducible to neat labels or descriptions" (24). A fully realized understanding of the meanings of his persona "presupposes the abandonment of binary systems of classifications...the deconstruction of sexual stereotypes, including those of recent, gay-affirmative and bisexual labelings" (24). Unlike most previous scholars, Girelli insists we must focus on the post-accident Clift as well as the beautiful Clift before his accident. She links her queer approach to disability studies and the (uncomfortably) so-called "crip theory." From a crip theory standpoint and through her reassessment of the post-accident Clift on film, Girelli critiques the assumptions made about an able-bodied subject by heteronormative structures of power. Girelli critiques the general dismissal of Clift's post-accident films as being centered in a bias against the non-able-bodied.

Red River (made in 1946, released in 1948), directed by genre auteur Howard Hawks, was the first Clift film to be shot, though not his first screen appearance, which was *The Search* (1948), directed by Fred Zinnemann. *Red River* is a Western set in the nineteenth century and co-stars Clift as Matt Garth and John Wayne as a man who adopts Garth. The film positions Clift crucially and foundationally as "a beautiful, erotically available boy" (36). Girelli counters the view of Clift's languid sexuality here as passive; rather, she observes, "his slow, deliberate movements exude self-control" (39).

Girelli's book makes its mark in queer-Clift studies through her painstaking evocation of and focus on his scenes with female co-stars. Describing the young star's erotic scenes with Tess, the female lead of *Red River*, played by Joanne Dru, she writes,

"Matt is highly responsive to Tess's erotic presence; he touches her neck and hair slowly and sensuously, then constantly shifts his position, expressing physical tension. His eyes rest on hers with desire..." (44).

Discussing Clift's role in *The Heiress*, William Wyler's great 1949 film adaptation of Henry James' novel *Washington Square*, the author observes that the film establishes Clift as "an ambiguous, yet undisputed object of erotic desire" (45). As Catherine Sloper, Olivia de Havilland gives a great performance as a shy, awkward woman who transforms into a hard, absolute revenger because Clift's charming but mercenary seducer Morris Townsend seduces but abandons her once he learns that her wealthy physician father will cut her out of his will if she marries Townsend. Playing this nineteenth century dandy, Clift is

"[e]laborately dressed in tight-fitting and frilly clothes, carefully groomed, with his hair and sideburns impeccably styled...a



Perhaps his greatest performance: with Burt Lancaster in *From Here to Eternity* (1953).



Prewitt (Clift) holds the dying Maggio (Frank Sinatra) in *From Here to Eternity*.



Girelli evokes the homoerotic *frisson* between Clift and Lancaster in *From Here to Eternity*.



Clift stunningly introduced by De Sica's probing camera in *Stazione Termini* (1953).



delectable sight" (47).

Even Catherine's cold, even sadistic father Dr. Austin Sloper (played memorably by Ralph Richardson), who does not believe that Morris could possibly desire Catherine for anything other than her wealth, "recognizes Morris' erotic value" (48). For Morris, however, eroticism seems to be entirely "self-reflective" (49).

Girelli rightly focuses on the queer potentialities of Clift's role in *The Search*, a beautifully made, moving, rather austere film (one's tears are freely given rather than wrenched loose) about a U.S. soldier who befriends and all but adopts a young Czech boy in postwar Berlin. The boy is silent and terrified as a result of the loss of most of his family members in Auschwitz, and his mother has survived and now searches for him among refugee camps and ruins. Subversively claiming the film as a paean to "man-boy love," Girelli evocatively draws out the queer valences in Clift's soldier Steve's relationship with the boy Karel (Ivan Jandl).

Of Clift's almost disorientingly appealing presence in this film, the author observes, the "overall impression is that of a gorgeous-looking creature, whose gum-chewing and general banter do not manage to fully virilize. This ambiguous image is reinforced by the lack of heterosexual narratives," as Steve is never shown to be involved in any romantic attachments with women (65). Indeed, he and a fellow soldier played by Wendell Corey come across as a gay male couple raising this lost, forlorn child who blossoms under their care, Steve's especially.

Clift made several more films in his major, pre-accident period, the especially notable ones being *A Place in the Sun* (George Stevens, 1951), *From Here to Eternity* (Fred Zinnemann, 1953), and Hitchcock's *I Confess* (1953). Girelli is particularly astute and compelling on evoking the homoerotic intensity of Clift's onscreen relationship with Burt Lancaster in *From Here to Eternity*, a film based on James Jones' novel, which, even in its expurgated form, contained a great deal of contraband information about homosexuality's secret life within the military (the narrative climaxes in the Pearl Harbor attack). These stunning films demonstrate Clift's peculiar, idiosyncratic, intense, multifaceted, and deeply brooding brilliance as an actor. Often linked to the other rebel males Marlon Brando and James Dean, Clift, to my mind, surpasses them in the skillful specificity of his characterizations—little wonder that Brando was so obsessed with competing against him. (A major disappointment is the scant attention Girelli pays to Vittorio De Sica's frustrating but moodily fascinating 1953 film *Stazione Termini*, starring Clift and Jennifer Jones. Her obsessive, micro-managing producer husband David O. Selznick released an inferior version of De Sica's film in the United States called *Indiscretion of an American*

The trials of the heterosexual couple: Jennifer Jones and Clift in *Stazione Termini*.



The priest suffers for humanity's sins: Hitchcock's *I Confess* (1953)

Wife.)

Sadly for Clift and for the movies, he suffered a horrific car accident in 1956 during the filming of the forgettable Civil War epic *Raintree County* (Edward Dmytryk, 1957), which reunited him with his *Place in the Sun* co-star Elizabeth Taylor. She played an instrumental role in saving his life, reaching into his mouth and pulling out the two teeth he was choking on at the scene of the grisly accident. She also successfully threatened the photographers swarming around his wrecked car and body that they'd never be welcome at the studio again if they took photographs of him in this condition. Given how extensively his face, which took the brunt of the impact of his car wreck, was injured, the doctors at the time did a fairly remarkable job of putting it back together—but the damage was undeniable. Clift no longer looked like himself. If he was not disfigured, he was also no longer beautiful, an undeniable shift having taken place. And it wasn't just his face that was altered—his voice became lower, gruffer, his body movements slower, halting.

Girelli does a heroically astute job of offering detailed analyses of Clift's post-accident films, especially *The Young Lions* (Edward Dmytryk, 1948), in which he plays a Jewish American named Noah Ackerman and was paired up with Dean Martin and Brando (with whom he shares only one scene but without any dialogue; they are never in the same frame). She points out that "a new queerness" awaits discovery in these later films, and indeed her analysis leads one to seek them out anew.



Little wonder that Anne Baxter still pines for the faithful priest in *I Confess*...



...but what lies beneath the brooding surface for Father Logan?



Torn between two lovers: Clift between Elizabeth Taylor and Eva Marie Saint in *Raintree County* (1957). Clift had his horrific, visage-altering accident during the making of this film.

I was especially grateful to encounter her wonderfully incisive reading of *Suddenly, Last Summer* (1959), which, in my view, is Joseph L. Mankiewicz's most cinematically daring film. Tennessee Williams wrote the dazzling screenplay, based on his play. The film was denounced as homophobic in the wake of Vito Russo's call for positive images in *The Celluloid Closet*. Russo's pioneering work retains a great deal of value, but its relegation of works like this film to the homophobic film canon did a serious disservice. For these reasons, I am thrilled to see Girelli's defense of it here and evocation of Clift's resistant masculinity in it.

Suddenly, Last Summer is one of the greatest films of the 1950s, climaxing in a terrifyingly lyrical, hallucinatory depiction of Elizabeth's Taylor's confession of what really happened to her homosexual-poet cousin Sebastian Venable, who uses her luscious bikini-clad body to "procure" the boys of Cabeza de Loco, Spain. (They cannibalistically devour him in retaliation.) Girelli also offers a master class in detailed analysis of a film actor's performance in her reading of Clift's work in the 1961 *Judgment at Nuremberg*, directed by Stanley Kramer, a heroic last great performance of fifteen minutes or so by the debilitated, painkiller-addicted and alcoholic actor, who was being trotted out as a sideshow attraction at Andy Warhol parties by this point.



With Hope Lange in *The Young Lions* (1948). Clift regarded his meticulous, “mutant” performance as Noah Ackerman, an intransigent Jewish American drafted into World War II action, as his best.



The film is better known for Marlon Brando’s turn as an idealistic ski-instructor-turned Nazi.

I do not have the space to give this dimension of her argument its proper treatment here, but I find the premise of “straight queerness” both exciting and worrisome. I have made my own case for the potentialities of heterosexuality as a site of queer energies.[1][[open endnotes in new window](#)] But it is one thing to make the case that a particular artist, author or actor, can queer heterosexuality by denaturing and otherwise deconstructing it and, I think, another to make the claim, as Girelli does, that

“to queer hetero identities means to validate the deviations, contradictions, and possibilities inherent in relations between men and women. Heterosexuality can thus be reclaimed as subversive, as part of the nonessentialist discourse underpinning queerness” (176).

No doubt that this is a noble goal, but it has the effect here, as a central dimension of Girelli’s argument, of de-gaying Clift’s screen persona.

As noted, Girelli does a marvelous job of attending to same-sex desire in Clift’s work, and she would, I think, be disappointed to learn that I came away from her book feeling that the queering of Clift’s career she so brilliantly makes a case for has the effect, overall, of de-gaying his persona. The problem at work here, one certainly not exclusive to Girelli, is that the critic uses an established gay/queer reading of an artist as the template for what is then offered as a game-changing counter-reading of this established one. But what led to such established readings was a long and shifting process of appropriation and discovery.

The ways in which Clift became a homosexual icon are varied, complex, and the result of a genealogy of resistant readings of his ostensibly and purportedly straight screen presence. To then use this gay/homosexual iconicity as a belief that must be overturned by the presumably more radical, presumably infinitely more capacious and varied model of straight queerness is, for all of its myriad and compelling virtues, a form of rhetorical violence that, in my view, the book never fully recovers from.

The gay male love for Montgomery Clift is indistinguishable from a specific, historical discourse within which a gay canon of works, ranging from Melville’s novella *Billy Budd* to movies like *The Wizard of Oz* to *All About Eve* to *What*



Elizabeth Taylor on the verge of a lobotomy as Clift and Katharine Hepburn look on in the great, undersung *Suddenly, Last Summer* (1959)



As a witness for the prosecution, Clift gave one

last great performance in *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961).

Ever Happened to Baby Jane? emerged. The more utopian and inclusive model of straight queerness offers the considerable benefit of allowing us to re-examine Clift's heterosexual passions onscreen, but it also, in its very capacious utopianism, threatens to obliterate a gay/homosexual history of love for Clift. Luckily, love, in all of its myriad forms, is in the air throughout this complexly conceived, thoroughly engaging, and provocative book.



Clift in the title role in John Huston's *Freud* (1962)



Montgomery Clift: to whom do you beautifully belong?

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Notes

1. My book-in-process on Alfred Hitchcock films, *Intimate Violence*, makes the case that he subversively queers heterosexual relations. My book *Gender Protest and Same-Sex Desire in Antebellum American Literature* (Ashgate, 2014) argues that Nathaniel Hawthorne accomplishes a similar feat in his 1850 novel *The Scarlet Letter*. [[return to text](#)]

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"Factory of New Film Expressions": Alternative Film/Video Festival, Belgrade

Academic Film Centre, 10-14 December 2013

by [Kamila Kuc](#)



Academic Film Club, New Belgrade:
Headquarters of the Alternative Film/Video
Festival. Photographed by Kamila Kuc.

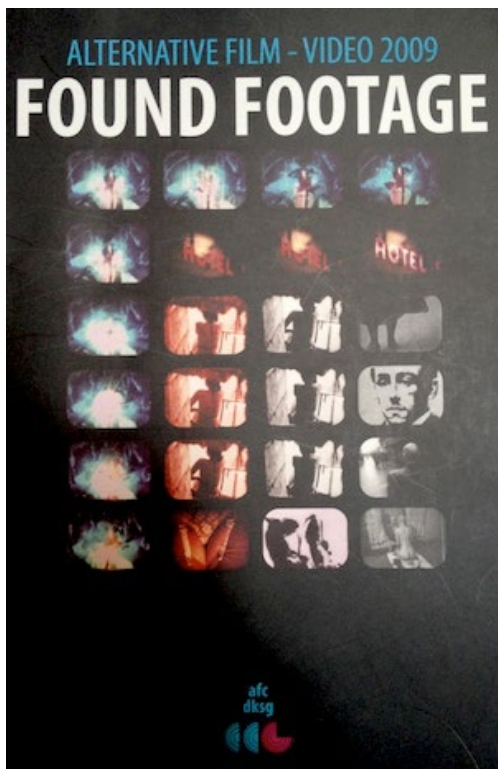
Now in its thirty-first year, the Alternative Film/Video Festival began life in Belgrade in 1982 with the aim of recording and theoretically defining “authentic values and new creative possibilities in the field of alternative film.”[1][\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) According to Peter Wollen, a jury member in 1984, “the basic achievement of the authors of alternative film in Yugoslavia” was “the exploration of the ontology of the medium,” as well as a consideration of film “as a part of the modernist movement.”[2] This can also be said of Yugoslav video art, which was at its peak in the 1980s when the Alternative Film/Video Festival was created.[3]

But the avant-garde scene in Yugoslavia has always been vigorous. Since the early 1920s, movements such as Zenithism, Cosmism and Hypnism, which fused Expressionism, Futurism, Constructivism and Surrealism, all betrayed a fascination with film.[4] After Tito’s 1948 breakaway from Stalin and the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia enjoyed greater artistic freedom than many other Eastern European countries at the time.[5] In this climate, alternative film culture burgeoned as cine-clubs were established in almost every city of Yugoslavia, introducing their members to various trends in international cinema.

The Alternative Film/Video Festival is one outcome of this cinephile tradition. It is the oldest active festival of avant-garde film and video in Europe. It follows in the tradition of another significant alternative event in Socialist Yugoslavia, the Genre Experimental Film Festival in Zagreb (1963-1967).[6] The Alternative Film/Video Festival ceased to function during the Yugoslav Wars (1991-2002) but was successfully reinstated in 2003, and in 2006 it became an international venture. Every year this non-profit event is accompanied by a bilingual publication (in Serbian and English) based around a key theme from the previous year’s Festival. To name but a few of the themes: found footage film (2009), cine-clubs (2010) and the archiving and digitizing of film (2011).[7]

The Alternative Film/Video Festival is held in the Student City Cultural Centre in New Belgrade (Novi Beograd), which was founded in 1958 as the Academic Film Club and educated such key figures of the Yugoslav alternative film scene as Kokan Rakonjac, Tomislav Gotovac, Nikola Duric, Bojan Jovanovic and Miodrag Milosevic. Nowadays, it produces over 500 films and videos annually and holds a vast archive of Yugoslav alternative film and video. The Centre also offers a month-long residency award that provides a film/videomaker with a studio and full production support for a new film, which premieres at the Festival the following year. The most recent outcome of this residency is Nadine Poulain’s geometric abstract piece *Sky Lines*, also selected for this year’s Berlinale Shorts competition.

Lasting five days, Alternative Film/Video has numerous international experimental film/video programs and specially commissioned exhibitions and workshops. In its



Found Footage (2009), bilingual publication of
the Alternative Film/Video Festival. Photo by
Kamila Kuc.



Cine-Clubs (2010), bilingual publication of the Alternative Film/Video Festival. Photographed by Kamila Kuc.



Archiving and Digitizing (2011), bilingual publication of the Alternative Film/Video Festival. Photographed by Kamila Kuc.

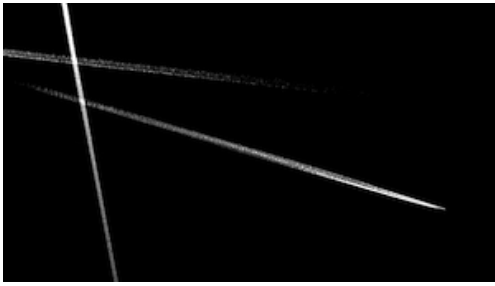
its attempt to reduce the gap between film theory and practice, the Festival also brings together filmmakers, academics, programmers and curators in an Academic Forum to debate experimental film in relation to particular themes. The 2013 Forum's discussions centred on the theme of fragmentation, explored in presentations given by a wide range of international scholars.

- Professor Nevena Dakovic (Department of Theory and History, University of Belgrade) talked about "disassemblation" (Dakovic's own neologism, meaning fragmentation) as an organized artistic strategy of the Yugoslav avant-gardes.
- Branka Bencic, a Croatian independent curator, discussed the challenges of curating works of art from the former Yugoslav republics due to the republics' final disintegration in the early 2000s.[8]
- Professor Bryan Konefsky (Department of Cinematic Arts, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque) offered an engaging philosophical reflection on the contemporary deconstruction of found footage films, as practiced by numerous artists centred around Basement Films in Albuquerque, New Mexico, which I will return to at a later stage.
- Miriam de Rosa (Adjunct, Catholic University of Milan, Communications and Performing Arts Department) presented a dynamically entitled paper, "Frammenti elettrici" ("Electric fragments"), that analyzed the work of Angela Ricci Lucchi and Yervant Gianikian and, like Dakovic's paper, proposed fragmentation as an avant-garde tactic.

Many aspects of Dakovic's paper also corresponded with my presentation, "Cinema without Film: A Fragmented History of Polish Avant-Garde Film, 1916-1937." In the example of Feliks Kuczkowski's 1916 now lost animations, I argued that fragmentation is the key factor that ought to be taken into account when writing a history of Polish avant-garde film prior to the 1930s. When attempting to establish Kuczkowski's status within the history of Polish avant-garde film, one relies only on fragmentary evidence—in particular, his memoirs (written in retrospect, thus not entirely accurate), frames from his films and statements from his contemporaries. The Forum concluded with U.S. film restorer Bruce Posner's remarks on the complex process of restoring *Manhatta* (Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand, 1921, USA) for the *Unseen Cinema: Early American Avant-Garde Film 1893-1941* DVD collection (2001). What emerged as a connecting thread between most of these presentations was understanding fragmentation as both a geopolitical consequence of war (including the recent disintegration of Yugoslavia, the changing borders of pre-war Poland) and a conscious artistic strategy employed by particular avant-garde filmmakers, many of whom have been represented at the Alternative Film/Video Festival over the years.

The diverse body of work at this year's Alternative Film/Video Festival ranged from contemporary Croatian artists, through Australian avant-garde (1962-2012) and Austrian structuralism, to early U.S. avant-garde (1894-1941). There was also a sneak midnight preview: Bruce Posner's most recent restoration of Bruce Conner's *Cosmic Ray* (1962). Without a doubt, however, the most important event of this year's Festival was the "Antifilm and Structural Film in Belgrade" retrospective. This program was important for a number of reasons, which I will explore in some detail below. In the first instance, it demonstrated how little of the Yugoslav structural film is known to foreign audiences in comparison U.S., British and Austrian structural films (also included in this year's program). This festival viewing of a neglected national tendency in itself calls for a historical reassessment of the whole complex tendency in avant-garde film. Secondly, it wasn't hard to notice that only one female filmmaker featured in these projections and I shall return to this issue at a later stage.

Introduced by leading theorists and filmmakers Slobodan Sijan and Miodrag Milosevic, many rarely seen films were shown, including *Kruznica (Circle)* (Tomislav Gotovac, 1964), *Holiday (Praznik)* (Bojan Jovanovic, 1983) and Sijan's *The garden with paths that bifurcate (Vrt sa stazamasto se racvajaju)* (1971). A critic and



Sky Lines (Nadine Poulain, 2014): The outcome of the 2014 Alternative Film/Video residency programme.



Slobodan Sijan, Serbian theorist and filmmaker introducing 'Antifilm and Structural Film in Belgrade.' Photo by Kamila Kuc.



Miodrag Milosevic, Serbian filmmaker and theorist introducing 'Antifilm and Structural Film in Belgrade.' Photo by Kamila Kuc.



Circle (Tomislav Gotovac, 1964): 360 degree view of Belgrade.

Sijan's latest publication, *Kino Tom* (2011), is devoted to the work of a multimedia artist and filmmaker Tomislav Gotovac, and is currently being translated into English by the Festival's programmer, Greg De Cuir, Jr.[9] Filmed on top of a building, in Gotovac's *Kruznica*, the camera is placed on a tripod and pans 360 degrees. Parts of Belgrade are being shown as the camera zooms from long shots to close-ups – a technique which causes a feeling of dizziness in the viewer. The program was accompanied by an exhibition of supporting material, including Sijan's manifesto "Diagram of Antifilm: Us & Them," originally published in 1976 in *Filmograf*. [10] According to Sijan's chart, the Yugoslav films made in 1963, such as *The Morning of a Faun* (Gotovac), *The Yard*, *Scusa signiorina* and *K3 or the Clear Sky Without Clouds* (Mihovil Pansini) and in 1964, such as *Toilet* (Pansini), *Direction* and *Circle* (Gotovac), together with the films of Andy Warhol and the Fluxus Group, represented one specific current of world avant-garde film.

[Sijan's chart reproduced on page 2]

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

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Slobodan Sijan, "Diagram of Antifilm: Us & Them," *Filmograf*, 1976.

Slobodan Šijan / June 1976 /: Diagram - ANTIFILM, US & THEM													
<p>In 1963-64 within the framework of what will remain famous in Yugoslavia under the name "antifilm", two authors: Mihovil Pansini and Tomislav Gotovac had created films which, together with Andy Warhol's and films made by Fluxus group, anticipated one current of the world avant-garde film. In 1969 P.A. Sitney will classify it as "structural film", David Curtis will expand it with additional category "minimal movies", while George Maciunas will try to define it more precisely as "monomorphic structure" film. The basic characteristic of these films is the reduction of the means of expression and, as Maciunas so well noted: "it emphasizes an image or idea of generalisation from particulars rather than particularization (arrangement into particular design or pattern) of generalities". Perhaps Dušan Stojanović, a Serbian film theorist, most accurately defined these films when he singled out fixation as common principle of antifilm. His assumption that this principle brings us into the realm of transcendental "the instant it was empirically proven that replacement of senses by intellect was possible..." preceded for several years Sitney's opinion that structural film is "more film of the mind than of the eye". Purpose of this diagram is to contribute to the better understanding of this fraction of the "antifilm" movement in a wider context and in relation to: treated problems and applied means of expression. Below is the list of the most relevant works of this persuasion in the world cinema, together with the most important films made by Yugoslav authors.</p>						PROBLEMS TREATED AND APPLIED MEANS OF EXPRESSION							
						UNIFORM LIGHT		INDEPENDENT MOVEMENT		AGGRESSIVE TIME		LIMITED SPACE	
						leader used frame by frame longer portions of leader		linear circular-spiral back-forth, left-right irregular		actual time		static camera	
										sequence shot one shot film		fixed tripod	
						one shot concept		static shot zoom active					
								360° pan(s) shorter pans					
1. Peter Kubelka: "Armulf Rainer" 1958.													
2. Nam June Paik: "Zen for film" 1962-4.													
3. Tomislav Gotovac: "Prije podne jednog fauna" 1963.													
4. Mihovil Pansini: "Dvorište" 1963.													
5. Mihovil Pansini: "K-3, ili čisto nebo bez oblaka" 1963.													
5. Mihovil Pansini: "Scusa Signorina" 1963.													
7. Andy Warhol: "Film" 1965													

1. Andy Warhol: "Liss" 1963.
3. Andy Warhol: "Sleep" 1963.
9. Andy Warhol: "Eat" 1963.
10. Brion Gysin: "Flicker Machine" 1963-4.
11. Andy Warhol: "Haircut" 1964.
12. Andy Warhol: "Blowjob" 1964.
13. Andy Warhol: "Empire" 1964.
14. Tomislav Gotovac: "Pravac" 1964.
15. Tomislav Gotovac: "Kružnica" 1964.
16. Mihovil Pansini: "Zahod" 1964.
17. Stan Brakhage: "Song 6." 1964.
18. John Cavanaugh: "The Dragons Claw" 1965.
19. Tony Conrad: "The Flicker" 1965.
20. Andy Warhol: "Party Sequence" 1965.
21. Bruce Baillie: "Still Life" 1966.
22. Bruce Baillie: "All My Life" 1966.
23. Andy Warhol: "Chelsea Girls" 1966.
24. George Maciunas: "10 feet" 1966.
25. Paul Sharits: "Ray Gun Virus" 1966.
26. Mike Snow: "Wavwlenght" 1967.
27. Mike Snow: "Standard Time" 1967.
28. Lutz Momartz: "Eisenbahn" 1967.
29. Mike Snow: "Back and Forth" 1968-9.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



The Journey (Putovanje, Bojana Vujanovic, 1972): Bogumila Milla going up in a modernist lift, colour footage. Courtesy of the artist.



The Journey: a single continuous shot, black and white footage. Courtesy of the artist.

This trend of what Sijan calls "Antifilm" was praised by the U.S. critic P. Adams Sitney in 1969 as "Structuralist Film," which Sitney said marked "a movement toward increased cinematic complexity" with films of predetermined and predefined shape."^[11][\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) According to Sitney's definition, the structural film "insists on its shape, and what content it has is minimal and subsidiary to the outline."^[12] In 1976 a British experimental filmmaker Peter Gidal expanded on this definition distinguishing it from his own, "Structuralist/Materialist Film," as seen in his influential book, *Structural Film Anthology*.^[13] For Gidal the most important aspect of Structural/Materialist film is that it "attempts to be non-illusionist" and aims at demystifying the film process.^[14] Above all, such film "does not represent, or document anything"; instead it "produces certain relations between segments, between what the camera is aimed at and the way that 'image' is presented."^[15] For Gidal specific filmic devices such as "repetition within duration" are employed to decode both the film's material and the film's construct, and "to decipher the precise transformations that each co/incide/nce of cinematic techniques produces."^[16] The discovery of shape thus may become the theme and the narrative of the film. For Gidal, this constitutes "a crucial distinction for a (dialectically) materialist definition of structural film."^[17] "That is why," he argues, "Structural/Materialist film [...] demands an orientation of definition completely in opposition to the generally used vague notions concerning 'Structural Film.'"^[18] Other functioning definitions of structuralist film include David Curtis' category of conceptual "Minimal Movies" in Britain^[19] and George Maciunas' "Monomorphic Structural Film" in the United States that has "a single simple form" and which exhibits "one structural pattern."^[20]

The less known but certainly not less fascinating Yugoslav contribution to this tendency includes Sijan's definition of structuralist film as "antifilm," with its main characteristic being "a basic reduction of the means of expression and observation of subjects and things in front of the camera."^[21] As Sijan points out, another Serbian film theorist, Dusan Stojanovic, most accurately defined these films by singling out "fixation as common principle of antifilm."^[22]

What unites all structuralist filmmakers in Britain, the United States, and Yugoslavia is their wish to attack the mechanisms of representation of reality based on identification, which prevailed mainstream cinema and which required mostly passive audience.^[23] Structuralist filmmakers achieved this by turning the medium of film into a conceptual, self-reflexive exercise. Structuralist films draw attention to the very form of film rather than offer the viewer a straightforward experience of devouring what he/she sees on the screen. Thus, they question the politics and aesthetics of representation.

The sheer range of films presented in the structuralist program at this year's Alternative Film/Video Festival, as well as the complexity of the debates surrounding structural film, call for a revision of what we include in this important international avant-garde trend.



Tree of Life (Bojana Vujanovic, 1977-78): filmed at the Academic Film Club, Belgrade. Courtesy of the artist.



Tree of Life: red lipstick. Courtesy of the artist.



Tree of Life: graphic match: from red lipstick to a red car. Courtesy of the artist.

This reassessment is also required where the contribution of female filmmakers to the avant-garde film tradition is concerned: the (non)incorporation of women throughout the Alternative Film/Video Festival requires further attention. The role women have played within the avant-garde film scene in Yugoslavia remains under-acknowledged, and this program featured only one female filmmaker: Bojana Vujanovic, with her 16mm short film, *The Journey* (*Putovanje*, 1972). A member of the Belgrade cine-club since 1968, Vujanovic encountered some of her influences there. *The Journey* partly reflects her fascination with the work of the cinematographer Petar Blagojevic, who shot Gotovac's *Kruznica*. At the time of shooting *The Journey*, Vujanovic had only heard of Blagojevic's and Gotovac's film. Limited by her film equipment, "which could only film several minutes of tape in one go," after which the roll in the camera needed to be stopped, rewound or changed, Vujanovic decided on the technique she heard was used by the two male filmmakers in *Kruznica*.^[24] Vujanovic's film depicts a woman (Bogumila Milla, who also acted in Vujanovic's other films) going up a stylish modernist lift. As the lift ascends, the camera pans through 360 degrees in a spiral movement, resulting in a feeling of dizziness. The film was made from a single continuous shot. Developed partially in black and white and partially in color, the piece was initially to be a part of Vujanovic's project, "Vanishing Belgrade" (1968), which included filming old streets, buildings and parks.

Her next film, *Tree of Life* (1977-78) was shot in The Hague, and begins with a half-naked woman putting red lipstick on her face.^[25] The red color is matched with that of an apple rolling on the floor, and the film consists of effective graphic matches and a highly experimental use of sound, slowed down and manipulated, which gives an eerie, disturbing effect. *The Tree of Life* is now being digitally re-edited at the Academic Film Center under the title *New Life of the Tree of Life*. Rarely shown, Vujanovic's films are no less engaging and technically arresting than those of her male colleagues, suggesting that the question of women in relation to avant-garde film in Yugoslavia needs further investigation.

As Diana Nenadic from Academic Film Centre in Zagreb explained to me, until the emergence of video art in the 1970s the position of female filmmakers within the alternative film scene was generally weak.^[26] There were, however, exceptions. One was the prolific Divna Jovanovic, now considered the pioneer of Serbian avant-garde animation, who emerged from the Belgrade cine-club in the 1960s and was renowned for her concept of pure animation and non-narrative visual poetry.^[27] For her films *Deadline* (1960) and *Rondo* (1964), Jovanovic painted directly on celluloid, while for *Life is hard* (*Zivot je tezak*, 1969), *Fetis* (1971) and *Metamorphosis* (*Preobrazaj*, 1972), she scratched the surface of the film, leading to comparisons with the work of Norman MacLaren.^[28] In Zagreb's cine-club, female filmmakers appeared sporadically, with Tatjana Ivancic being the key example. Between 1967 and 1986, she made approximately seventy shorts, mostly lyrical documentaries. The first



Tree of Life: the tree of life, The Hague.
Courtesy of the artist.



A Moment of Truth (Gisèle Rapp-Meichler, 2013, France): Struthof Concentration Camp, Alsace. Courtesy of the artist.



A Moment of Truth: Perverse contrast: sunny meadows of Struthof. Courtesy of the artist.

female filmmaker within Split's cine-club was Dunja Ivanisevic, who was active in the 1960s, but whose achievements were largely overshadowed by her male colleagues until 1987, when she made an experimental documentary *Zemsko* (1968).

It is because of such reversals of history that festivals like Alternative Film/Video Festival have a responsibility to paint a more accurate picture of avant-garde film by demonstrating women's prolific input. This year's Festival's programmers, members of the advisory board and the jury, were all men. However, since the 2013 Alternative Film/Video Festival considered the theme of fragmentation in both film form and in the process of constructing a history of avant-garde film in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, it should also extend that theorizing to investigate how and why the contribution of women artists remains conspicuously left out. The consequences of such significant omission to the general history of avant-garde film require thorough exploration, something the Festival should address in the near future.[29]

Writing a history of anything is a non-objective, ideological practice, especially to consider the complexities surrounding histories of visual arts (where the contribution of women remains one of the most neglected aspects). Such a history and its complexities in the countries of Eastern Europe and the Balkans are still being assessed. Here it is worth mentioning Jackie Hatfield's argument regarding the absence of women from the history of avant-garde film in general. In the 1970s and 1980s, Hatfield states, women were written out of the history of avant-garde film for yet another reason: their preoccupation with narrative, as opposed to abstraction and the formalist film tradition that dominated at the time.[30] This partially explains the exclusion of women from discourses surrounding the structuralist film tradition, with Vujanovic's work as one example.

However, there are other considerations. In the United States, women filmmakers such as Carolee Schneeman who dealt with explicit sexuality and body art (*Fuses*, 1965) were often neglected, even within the feminist canon. In addition, numerous experimental women artists wanted to disassociate themselves from special consideration as women artists, often decrying the label "feminist." This has also been true in the former Yugoslavia. For example, in my email conversation with the filmmaker, Vujanovic underlined that her concern has always been with the quality of her work, and she separated herself from any connection to feminism: "Can't I be regarded just as an artist, irrelevant of my gender?"[31] Similarly, in a recent forum "Women's Images of Men" (Nottingham Contemporary, UK, 2014) an artist Lill-Ann Chepstow-Lusty remarks: "Ideally one wouldn't want to be a gender. One wants to just be an artist [...] but in its time it was important to define that you were a woman artist." [32] Chepstow-Lusty refers to the early 1980s Britain when she was involved, alongside Catherine Elwes and Sarah Kent, in promoting feminist art and discourse.[33] After all, as Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock argue, "[The] sex of the artist matters. It conditions the way art is seen and discussed." [34] The inequality of the means of production and distribution of film, as well as the exclusion of certain films because of their approaches and subjects not fitting "into the current zeitgeist" still remains an issue that needs addressing when writing about the history of avant-garde film.



A Moment of Truth: The film is dedicated to Diana Rowden, Vera Leigh, Andrée Borrel and Sonya Olschanezky, all executed on July 6, 1944. Courtesy of the artist.



A Moment of Truth: White and clean dissecting table. Courtesy of the artist.



A Moment of Truth: The coldness of winter. Courtesy of the artist.

Considering the absence of women on the Festival's advisory board and the jury, it is even more important to draw attention to at least one of the films made by an acclaimed female filmmaker in the Festival's main competition, Gisèle Rapp-Meichler. Rapp-Meichler has been making films with her husband Luc since 1976 (*Allée des signes*, 1976; *No Hans Land*, 1988). They are also the members of Light Cone, a non-profit making organization (founded in 1982 by Yann Beauvais and Miles McKane), which promotes, distributes and preserves experimental cinema in France and which since 2009 is under the presidency of Gisèle Rapp-Meichler.[35] Her film for this festival, *A Moment of Truth* (*Un instant de vérité*, 2013, France), is an understated, and thus all the more powerful, meditation on the crimes committed in a Struthof concentration camp in Alsace. This fine and subtle film brings to mind Alain Resnais' *Night and Fog* (*Nuit et brouillard*, 1955) in its examination of the impossibility of representing directly the horrors of the concentration camp. As the camera pans through the sterile interiors of the camp and the contrasting, sunny meadows around it, Nina Simone's 1964 performance of Waring Cuney's poem "No Images" (1926) plays on the soundtrack. *A Moment of Truth* is dedicated to the memory of four resistance women murdered in the camp: Diana Rowden, Vera Leigh, Andrée Borrel and Sonya Olschanezky, all executed on July 6, 1944.

Born in Upper Alsace, Rapp-Meichler visited the camp for the first time in 1959 on a family trip, she informed me, following the custom for the locals to confront the disturbing facts of recent history.[36] The film can be seen in contrast with the first feature film about the Holocaust, Wanda Jakubowska's *The Last Stage* (*Ostatni Etap*, 1948, Poland). Although this was not a documentary, some of the film's images were considered so "authentic" that Resnais used them as actuality footage in *Night and Fog*. [37] Rapp-Meichler's short, subjective piece is a powerful journey around a now deserted concentration camp, and its emotional effect is achieved largely through the absence of any documentary footage. Instead, the filmmaker creates an impressionistic image of the camp based on her own memory of a 'white and clean' dissecting table in a cold and empty room.

Very few films in the program were as gripping as Rapp-Meichler's, but Charles Lum's eyebrow raiser, *Lloyd Fein Must Die* (2012, USA), deserves some attention. Part of the "Happiness is a Warm Projector: Select Work from Experiments in Cinema Festival, Albuquerque, New Mexico" program presented by the Festival's Artistic Director Bryan Konefsky, the film is a fierce attack on Lloyd Blackfein, the CEO of Goldman-Sachs and of the highest paid executives on Wall Street. The film collages pornographic images of naked men and metaphorically equates them with the obscenity of Fein's daily procedures, which contributed to the irreversible economic crisis. In tune with such recent documentaries as *99%—The Occupy Wall Street Collaborative Film* (Audrey Ewell, Aaron Aites, 2013, US), the piece is a criticism of capitalism and its detrimental effects on nations.

Ioannis Savvidis' *The Residency* (Germany/Ireland, 2012), which was singled out by the jury, and Krasimir Dobrev's *Bloody Mr. Tomazo* (Bulgaria, 2012), the recipient of the Ivan Kaljevic Prize, should also be



Lloyd Fein Must Die (Charles Lum, 2012, USA): Criticism of capitalism. Courtesy of the artist and Experiments in Cinema Festival, Albuquerque, New Mexico.



The Residency (Ioannis Savvidis, 2014): Tati-like gag. Courtesy of the artist.



The Residency: Sisyphean task of making an art work. Courtesy of the artist.

mentioned. Savvidis' film is a witty take on the difficulties surrounding the creation of a work of art. It's a semi-autobiographical film about filmmaking. Faced with the near-impossibility of making a film as part of his residency, out of desperation Savvidis decides to film his everyday activities, ranging from washing dishes, watching cars passing by from his balcony, to purposelessly carrying a table up a mountain. Such impossible and pointless, Sisyphean task can also be seen in Francis Alÿs's *When Faith Moves Mountains* (2002), in which the Belgian artist hired hundreds of volunteers in Peru to move a shovel of sand one step at a time from one side of a dune to another. In its simplicity and humor, Savvidis' film also resembles Jacques Tati's gags. *The Residency* —in its diary-like form and investigation of the filmmaking process—is reminiscent of Robert Beavers' *From the Notebooks of...* (1971); the U.S. filmmaker, inspired by the notebooks of Leonardo Da Vinci, investigates his 16mm camera's functions, following on-screen instructions, written by Beavers himself: "Close the window shutting to a crack, film my reflection in the mirror as my hand moves in front of the mirrored light." *Residency* can be seen as a nod towards this self-reflexive tendency.

Awarded in memory of the avant-garde author and patron of alternative film, Ivan Kaljevic, this year's prize went to Krasimir Dobrev's *Bloody Mr. Tomazo*, a film that uses fast-cutting YouTube aesthetics to create an ironic portrait of Balkan machismo. The titular character, played by Dobrev himself, appears in a variety of costumes and poses to mock a cult of violence. Following the announcement of this prize, the audience was treated to a surprise screening of Kaljevic's humorous 1975 film, *Society for the Preservation of Silliness* (*Drustvo Za Zastitu Sasavih Dogadjaja*). In this Dada-like piece a group of men perform surreal, meaningless activities, such as watching TV in a middle of a field. The amateur quality of the piece is deliberate and defies the conventions of mainstream cinema. The film's title brings to mind Kurt Schwitters' "Ideas for Poems" (c.1926), with his proposal for a "Society for Purposeful Services." [39] In Kaljevic's film, everything these men do is purposeless.

One of the most engaging parts of the Alternative Film/Video was the "16mm Loop Workshop" delivered by the experimental filmmakers Michelle Mellor and Bryan Konefsky of Basement Films, Albuquerque, New Mexico. This friendly and inspiring event brought together local students and members of the public, as well as Festival participants. Opening with a screening of Bruce Conner's *Marilyn Times Five* (1968-1973), the workshop resulted in the production of numerous loop films, which were projected during the Festival's last night. Established in 1991 as an alternative film screening collective, Basement Films holds thousands of 16mm and Super8 films, alongside other archival media and also hosts the annual Experiments in Cinema International Film Festival. [40]

Lastly, a few remarks on the *The Torso* exhibition, which opened the Festival. Containing fragmented stories from Belgrade placed "in small appliances, objects and performances that tell those tales," the exhibition



'16mm Loop Workshop' by Michelle Mellor, Basement Films, Albuquerque, New Mexico: Students' film screening on the final night of the Alternative Film/Video. Photo by Kamila Kuc.



'16mm Loop Workshop' by Michelle Mellor, Basement Films, Albuquerque, New Mexico: Students' film screening on the final night of the Alternative Film/Video. Photo by Kamila Kuc.

was created by three energetic performance artists: Erich Goldmann, Michael Strohmann (both from Austria) and Momo Subotic (Mostar/Copenhagen).[41] In a photo and sound installation, *The Belgrade Loop*, the push of a button, pressed by the viewers, allows a carousel of images to move and stop at a random moment. Every image (of various place sin the city: parks, clubs, blocks of flats) is synchronized with its unique, pre-designed sound recording. In *My Private Belgrade*—"the movie-hurdy-gurdy man," Subotic is filmed strolling the streets of Belgrade, sharing stories of his life with passersby in exchange for their own stories. These tales are exhibited in a "movie-hurdy-gurdy": a box with a monitor and a crank, with which the viewer can control the speed of the film and rewind or fast-forward it. The interactive exhibition invites the viewer to be a part of it and thus engages with one of the most powerful principles of the avant-garde, as defined by Peter Bürger, among many others, as breaking the boundaries between art and life.[42]

The Alternative Film/Video Festival is one of the most dynamic experimental film festivals. In its admirable commitment to the spirit of alternative art and film, the Festival has been described by Karpo Godina, the Slovenian filmmaker, cinematographer and a former jury member, as a "factory of new film expressions." [43] Since these "new film expressions" are often produced by women, the 2014 Alternative Film and Video should invite women to participate as programmers. In addition, women themselves ought to demand greater parity as members of the jury and advisory board.[44] The input of female artists and filmmakers within the cinematic avant-garde, with particular attention to Yugoslav artists, of whom we still know so little, could be dealt with by programming a selection of films by women filmmakers and explored further as a key theme of the Academic Forum. This gesture would constitute an important and long overdue step towards addressing one of the largest omissions in film history—the role of women within it.

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The Torso Exhibition leaflet: 'the movie hurdy-gurdy.' Photo by Kamila Kuc.

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Notes

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1. Miodrag Milosevic, ed., *Film After Film: 30th Anniversary of the Alternative film/video festival* (Belgrade: Akademski filmski centar, Dom culture Studentski grad, 2013), p.7 and Branislav Miltojevi, "The cine club era, or a few theses about first (anti)cinema/alternative explorations and experiments," Milosevic, ed., *The Cine-Club Era* (Belgrade: Akademski filmski centar, Dom culture Studentski grad, 2011), p.77.

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2. Peter Wollen, 1984, quoted in Milosevic, "Alternative Film and Video in Yugoslavia," 2011, p.55.

3. Barbara Borcic, "Video Art from Conceptualism to Postmodernism," Dubravka Djuric and Misko Suvakovic, eds., *Impossible Histories: Historical Avant-gardes, Neo-avant-gardes, and Post-avant-gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918-1991* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2003).

4. Pavle Levi, *Cinema by other means* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp.14 and 47.

5. Djuric and Suvakovic, 2003, p.52.

6. Other festivals in the region include Amateur and Artist Film Festival in Pula (MAFAF, 1965-1990) and the Alternative Film Meeting in Split (1977-1987).

7. See, Miodrag Milosevic, ed., *Found Footage* (Belgrade: Akademski filmski centar, Dom culture Studentski grad, 2010) and *Archives, Digitalization, Distribution of Alternative Films in the Region* (Belgrade: Akademski filmski centar, Dom culture Studentski grad, 2012).

8. 'Timeline: Break-up of Yugoslavia', *BBC News Channel*, 22 May 2006 at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/4997380.stm>. Accessed on 25 July 2014. See also Tim Judah, *The Serbs. History, Myth and the Destruction of Yugoslavia* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), pp.312-337.

9. See also Greg de Cuir, *Yugoslav Black Wave: Polemical cinema from 1963-72 in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia* (Belgrade: Film Center Serbia, 2011).
10. This A4 flyer formed a part of the retrospective, *Anti-Cinema 1963/64; 1965/70* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade (23 June – 16 July 1976).
11. See P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film. The American Avant-Garde 1943-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp.347-348.
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12. Ibid., p.348.
13. Peter Gidal, *Structuralist Film Anthology* (London: British Film Institute, 1976). See also *Materialist Film* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989).
14. Gidal, 1976, p.1.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid. 82 and Peter Gidal, *Materialist Film* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989).
19. David Curtis, *A History of Artists' Film and Video in Britain* (London: British Film Institute, 2007), p.25. See also A.L. Rees, *A History of Experimental Film and Video* (London: BFI, 1999), pp.77-82.
20. Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film. Ozu, Bresson and Dreyer* (Boston: DaCapo Press, 1988), p.166.
21. See Slobodan Sijan, "Antifilm: Us & Them" diagram, June 1976, as well as Milosevic, 2013, p.52.
22. Sijan, 1976.
23. Gidal, 1976, p.6.
24. Email conversations between Bojana Vujanovic and myself, July 29, 2014.
25. Email conversations between Bojana Vujanovic and myself, March 13-26, 2014.
26. Email conversation between Diana Nenadic and myself, February 28, 2014.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.

29. See, for example, Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), xvii.
30. Jackie Hatfield, "Expanded Cinema and Narrative. Some Reasons for a Review of the Avant-Garde Debates Around Narrativity," *Millennium Film Journal*, no. 39/40, Winter 2003.
31. The question of feminism in Eastern Europe and the Balkans requires a more complex discussion, which is outside the scope of this review. See, for example, Allaine Czerwonka, "Travelling Feminist Thought: Difference and Transculturation in Central and Eastern European Feminism," *Signs*, vol.33, no.4, 2008.
32. Lill-Ann Chepstow-Lusty, "Women's Images of Men," Discussion Forum, Nottingham Contemporary, UK, 2014. With Catherine Elwes, Lill Ann Chepstow-Lusty and Amy Tobin. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UfQSj-ckf8s&list=PLgVZyUuoBISEasZHHLg2eXaRX_Qxh4UbW.%20Otherwise,%20in%20the%20UK%20Margaret%20Harrison%20collected. Accessed on 14 June 2014.
33. This talk centered on the two ICA exhibitions from the 1980s: "Women's Images of Men" and "About Time."
34. Parker and Pollock, 1981, p.50. See also Cindy Nemser, "Art Criticism and Women Artists," *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol.7, no.3, 1973 and Mary Ann Doane, "Aesthetics and Politics. Beyond the Gaze: Recent Approaches to Film Feminisms," *Signs*, vol.30, no.1, 2004.
35. For more details on Light Cone, see <http://lightcone.org/en/about-light-cone>.
36. Email conversation between Gisèle Rapp-Meichler and myself, March 8, 2014.
37. See for example, Marek Haltof, *Polish Film and the Holocaust. Politics and Memory* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014).
39. See Kurt Schwitters, "Ideas for Poems," Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris, ed. and trans., *Kurt Schwitters: poems performance pieces proses plays poetics* (Cambridge: Exact Change, 2002), p.87 [1926].
40. See Basement Films at <http://www.basementfilms.org>.
41. The Torso Exhibition leaflet.
42. See Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
43. Karpo Godina, 2012, quoted in Milosevic, 2013, p.121.

44. Women's exclusion as decision-makers in the film world still remains an issue even in mainstream cinema. Take, for example, the fact that only in January 2014 a renowned Polish filmmaker Agnieszka Holland was made *the first female chair* of the European Film Academy. See Polish Cultural Institute, New York at <http://en.polska.pl/Holland,becomes,the,first,female,chairman,of,the,EFA,Events,7072x4095.html>.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Broken Blossoms— artful racism, artful rape

by Julia Lesage

from *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, no. 26
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The films and television programs I enjoy often have the brutal murder of a woman as a key plot element.

Sexist and racist films and television programs continue to engage us as viewers, we women of all classes and races. The mass media catch us up in their violence and sensuality. As a woman I must ask how the media can so seduce me that I enjoy, either as entertainment or as art, works that victimize women as one of their essential ingredients. Historically from the silent film era to the present, bourgeois film has developed various mechanisms for structuring in ambiguity and for keeping us emotionally involved. One of film's hallmarks as a "democratic" art form is its ability to allow for and co-opt an oppressed group's response. Feminist film criticism takes as its task exposing these ideological mechanisms and analyzing how they function both internal to a film and in a broader cultural and political context.

Familiar sexual traits



Typage of the villain relies on a familiar, often exaggerated configuration of sexual traits.

Specifically, if we look closely at narrative films, with the intent of decolonizing our minds, we will find a similar "story" about sexual relations running below many films' surface. Over and over again, male and female film characters are assigned a popularly familiar configuration of sexual traits.[1][\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) This constellation of recognizable sexual traits provides mass art a way to express the culture's commonly held sexual fantasies. The way these fantasies are expressed varies, of course, from film to film, where they are manipulated and often displaced (e.g., in "doubles" or in Others) or condensed according to the exigencies of the plot and/or the social acceptability of directly expressing a given fantasy.[2]

Strikingly, the same kind of sexual-political "story," or assignation of sexual traits, is repeated from film to film, no matter how much the manifest content differs between films. This repetition is not ideologically neutral. Persistent configurations of assigned sexual traits, deriving perhaps most directly from 19th and 20th century literature, have a vitality in contemporary film because these patterns emerge from and serve to reinforce patriarchal social relations in the world outside the film.[3] Fictional sexuality parallels the real options that hegemonic male culture would like to keep on offering men and women today, and real power differentials between the sexes. In terms of the emotional options for both men and women that the cinematic configurations of sexual traits present and delimit, patterns of characterization are, in fact, usually oppressively perverse.

Broken Blossoms



Gish plays the waif in a film that treats girlhood in poverty in terms of victimization.



The Chinese man wanted to bring Buddhism to England.



He ended up in a London slum ...

In this context, that of durable yet perverse sexual-political structures in film, it is useful to look at one of the first films in the United States that was received as high art and as a progressive and emotionally moving statement against both masculine brutality and racial prejudice: D.W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms*. The film was released in 1919 and was one of a number of poetic and intimate depictions of domestic life which followed Griffith's monumental epics of 1915-16, *Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance*.

Birth of a Nation, originally entitled *The Clansman*, had valorized the founding of the Ku Klux Klan, depicting it as a paternalistic, semi-feudal organization bringing order to a South suffering under the "chaos" of Reconstruction. Consequently, the film provoked a national scandal because of its racist content. Griffith's cinematic rejoinder to the charges against him, *Broken Blossoms*, deliberately tried to counter the then dominant racist ways of depicting Asians in popular literature, magazines, and film. In reaction to the importation of masses of Asian laborers and congruent with U.S. imperial ambitions in the Pacific, the United States had seen waves of anti-Oriental" prejudice in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Newspapers sensationallly editorialized on and presented stories about the "yellow peril." Fictional narratives often used "inscrutable Orientals" as villains, or located vices such as drug addiction or white slavery in a U.S. Chinatown. In the decade before *Broken Blossoms*, films treated what seemed the most dangerous threat of all, "miscegenation." [4]

It is within this context that *Broken Blossoms* was perceived as a sensitive and humanitarian film. It daringly presented a chaste and ideally beautiful love between an immigrant Chinese man and a young white girl. The plot of the film was derived from Thomas Burke's short story, *The Chink and the Girl*, from his *Limehouse Nights*, tales of lumpen criminal life. Griffith changed Burke's Chinese protagonist from a schemer and "worthless drifter of an Oriental" to a poetic, peaceful Buddhist lover of beauty. [5] Ostensibly *Broken Blossoms* has a moral message: Asian Buddhist peacefulness is superior to Anglo-Saxon ignorance, brutality and strife.

Griffith embodies his moral message in his two male protagonists, a gentle Chinese storekeeper in London's Limehouse slum district, played by Richard Barthelmess, and a working-class brute there, Battling Burrows. Played by the large-framed, muscular actor Donald Crisp, Burrows prides himself on his masculine prowess. He is master both in the boxing ring and at home, where he bullies his housekeeper and daughter, the fifteen-year-old Lucy. Lucy, played by Lillian Gish, is a poverty-stricken, beaten child who awakens for one brief moment to emotional life before she is killed.

The plot of the film is simple. The film opens in a Chinese port city with Barthelmess in his ornate robes saying goodbye to his Buddhist mentor and then trying unsuccessfully to break up a fight between brawling U.S. sailors; the Chinese man is going to the West to bring a message of peace. The setting shifts to a London Limehouse slum, where we find out that the young Chinese man has become a lonely, disillusioned shopkeeper and opium addict.



... lonely, isolated, and ...



... lost in pipe dreams.



Burrows' fighting confirms his traditional masculinity, and also contributes to the plot, since he brutalizes his daughter.

Elsewhere in the slum, Battling Burrows sits in his shack reminiscing about a fight he has just won and is reprimanded by his manager for drinking and womanizing before his next fight.

Burrows' daughter Lucy is introduced, sitting huddled on a coil of rope on the wharf outside their house. (As Charles Affron points out in *Star Acting*, all the sets in this film are claustrophobic, even the outdoor ones. Departing from the epic scope of *Birth of a Nation*, *Broken Blossoms* formally accepts and uses the edge of the frame as limiting the scope of the action and incorporates many other boundaries such as walls, arches, and corners within the frame to enhance a claustrophobic effect.[6] Two sequences, indicating Lucy's reverie or perhaps moments recently experienced, present Lucy's "education" about women's lives. First, a woman in a crowded one-room apartment who is cooking a meal for her huge family and fighting with her husband advises Lucy never to get married. Then Lucy is seen on the street retrieving a compact dropped by one of two prostitutes, who also warn her about men. Lucy gets up and enters the shack.



"Never get married," a poor mother tells her.



Prostitutes warn Lucy as well.

Still smarting from his manager's rebuke, Burrows bullies Lucy. Before he goes out on the town again, he demands that she have tea ready when he gets back and also that she put a smile on her face. Lucy makes a pathetic gesture, using her fingers to turn up the corners of her mouth—it is a gesture she will repeat four times in the film.



The saccharine smile.

In Burrows' absence, Lucy takes out a few treasures from under a brick on the floor, puts a new ribbon in her dirty hair, and goes out to shop. She looks longingly at the dolls in the Chinese man's shop window, buys a few essentials from a street stand, and wants to trade in some tinfoil to buy a flower but does not have enough foil. She is harassed on the street by another Chinese man, Evil Eye, but is protected by Barthelmess. When she goes home, her father, irritated by his manager's restrictions on his social life, bullies her. In nervousness, she drops hot food on his hand. Burrows angrily takes out a whip from under the bed and beats her unconscious. He then goes out to work out in the gym preparing for his big fight.



After being beaten, Lucy goes out on the street and faints at the Chinese man's shop.

Lucy staggers to her feet, leaves the house, and weaves down the Limehouse streets. She falls unconscious through the door of the Chinese man's store. He has prepared himself an opium pipe and sits and gazes at her as if she were a vision in his drugged dream. She stirs and startles him into full awareness. He bathes her wounds, takes her upstairs to his living quarters, gives her his Oriental robe to wear, and puts her on his bed as on an altar. He surrounds her with all his beautiful things, gives her a doll, and is sexually attracted to her. As he moves to kiss her, he sees her fear and kisses the sleeve of her robe instead. Intercut with this sequence are shots of Burrows slugging it out and winning his big fight amidst the wild cheers of a working-class male audience.

One of Burrows' friends while shopping at the Chinese man's store discovers Lucy alone asleep upstairs and runs to tell Burrows of the daughter's "sin." The boxer and his friends agree to wait till after the big fight to settle the affair. When they get to the store, the Chinese man is away on an errand. Burrows hits his daughter, forces her to change back into her rags and come with him, and destroys everything in the upstairs room. His friends downstairs keep Lucy from escaping.



He takes her up to his second floor living quarters where she luxuriates in one night of loving care.

Once back at home, Burrows chases Lucy, who takes refuge in the closet. When she refuses to come out, Burrows smashes in the closet door with an ax; this sequence is shot from inside the closet, showing Lucy's hysterical reaction and absolute fear. The claustrophobic visual composition and Gish's acting indicate that we are intended to be "inside" Lucy's experience in this cinematic equivalent of rape. When Burrows chops through the door, he pulls Lucy through it and throws her on the bed, where he beats her to death.

Upon discovering the destruction in his room and Lucy's abduction, the Chinese man throws himself on the floor and sobs hysterically. He takes a gun, goes to Burrows' shack, finds Lucy dead, acknowledges the challenge Burrows gives him to fight, and shoots and kills the evil brute. Taking Lucy's body with him, the Chinese man goes back to his room and lays her body once again on his bed as on an altar. Burrows' friends discover the boxer's body and get the police to round up the Asian killer. Before they can do so, in a last act of tranquil and sorrowful love, even ecstasy, the "yellow man" praying before his Buddha stabs himself and joins his child-woman in death. This is the "plot" of *Broken Blossoms*.

The abuses of masculinity

If we analyze the story line more closely, looking particularly at the visual elements and cinematic tactics used to present it, it will become clear that the



Burrows possesses his daughter as a household drudge. He moves around a lot and occupies the space of their small house with large, violent gestures. In contrast, in that space she huddles and tries to avoid his wrath. The use of the bed as a prop facilitates the condensation of her character into daughter and wife.

film is *about* sex roles as much as it is *about* race. In particular, it is about masculinity. In the figure of Battling Burrows, the film presents the potential evil of masculinity, here safety attributed to a grotesque Other from the lower classes. Projected onto the Chinese man's character are all the traits of the 19th century sensitive outsider, the romantic hero—a self-destructive dreamer who never lives out the fulfillment of his dreams. I wish to examine how and why such traits have been divided and assigned to the two major male characters in the film, and also what it means that the narrative places both men in relation to a "virgin." Finally I wish to look at the kind of role assigned to Lillian Gish and Gish's impact on/attraction for me as a woman viewer both drawn to and distressed by this film.

In *Broken Blossoms*, if we look closely at the gestures, the clothing, and the course of events in any given sequence, we will see that our interpretation of the characters' behavior relies on and indeed underscores many popular notions about what masculinity and the abuses of masculinity are. As Donald Crisp plays Battling Burrows, he uses exaggeration to delineate the attributes of a working-class bully and macho brute. Burrows carries the traditional attributes of masculinity to an abusive extreme. In contrast, Barthelmess plays the Chinese man as being in many ways not fully a man, as woman-like. Compare, for example, our judgments on the costumes and gestures of the two men as we first see them. We notice the ornateness of Barthelmess' robe, his facial gestures, especially his looking upward with half-closed eyes, his carrying a fan, his small movements, and his semi-static poses and stance.



"Woman-like."



Exaggerated brutishness.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



As the film opens in China, this image evokes the happy family and a well ordered and prosperous patriarchy.



The Chinese man tries to pacify the rowdy British sailors but they knock him to the ground.

The opening titles and the choice of content in the film's early shots would seem to indicate that the initial contrast between a port in the Far East and a Limehouse slum is intended to emphasize a social and moral point, namely that Asian civilization and altruism outshine European and American immorality and grossness. Yet another set of reflections are simultaneously elicited from the audience—an evaluation and comparison of effeminacy vs. brute manliness. In his scripted role and in the connotations borne by his figure, Barthelmess as the Chinese man seems to elicit from the audience a common social accusation: that of effeminacy. That is, time and time again, the viewer seems led to conclude, "That's an effeminate man—or effeminate gesture, or article of clothing, etc." The young Asian man's robe is excessively ornate; in the exterior shots, its skirts conspicuously blow in the wind. It is shapeless, making the shape beneath it androgynous in form. When he is in the Buddhist temple with his mentor, the temple itself filled with flowers, exotica, and ornate design, Barthelmess acts "girl-like"—holding a fan, moving only with slight restrained gestures, and standing with eyes cast down.

In contrast to the Chinese man's demeanor, we are also presented in these sequences with men self-consciously proud of their masculinity, the U.S. sailors whom Griffith calls in one intertitle, "barbarous Anglo-Saxon sons of turmoil and strife." They swizzle down liquor, stuff food grotesquely into their mouths, make large gestures, swagger around as ugly Americans totally insensitive to their milieu, and seem incapable of being together without violent physical discord. They foreshadow Griffith's critique of Battling Burrows.

In the Limehouse environment, we first see the Chinese man huddled against a wall, one foot up against it, arms wrapped around himself, eyes cast sadly down. The soft curve of Barthelmess' body seems to "catch" the contrasting, harsh linear angles of the architecture against which he is posed, and for a man to have his arms wrapped around himself is to assume a typical "woman's" gesture of depression, insecurity, and even sad self-hatred. As he is introduced to us in his Limehouse environment, the Chinese man takes a stance which is as far from that of a masculine doer, a self-determining agent of one's own life, as it is possible to present. In his store we see him semi-statically posed smoking his opium against a background of meager beauty, that life he could create for himself being one of melancholy, contemplation and escape.

The opium den which the Chinese man goes to suggests not only moral but sexual derangement. As a matter of fact, fictional films usually "signal" moral derangement by showing us women in sexually transgressive roles. Here, we see mannishly dressed women in sexually active poses or in compositions of sexual self-sufficiency or dominance, often with a man of another race. In one composition, an Anglo woman is sitting higher than and looking down on a totally self-absorbed, opium-smoking Turk; another shot shows a blonde woman interacting with a Black worker; another, an Anglo woman flirting with a Chinese man we later know as Evil Eye.



Body in soft curves, shrinking, static, alone.



The opium den provides many connotations of derangement. Disorder both social and moral is indicated by ...



... "race mixing," otherwise not seen in the film except for Lucy and the Chinese man.



A blonde, "loose" woman and a black man. Their poses are not unusual, but they appear together ...



only in an opium den, where the Chinese men also gamble and argue — another indicator of immigrant moral laxness.



Illicit ecstasy, sexual derangement, ...



... and the opium couch.

We see a woman lying on a couch, filmed either as if she wishes to seduce someone or as if the opium were giving her an orgasmic experience on her own. She is panting slightly, wetting her lips, and looking toward the camera with an expression that suggests illicit ecstasy. This shot parallels a later one of Barthelmess stretched out full length on a couch, with the opium seller tending this completely passive figure. The equation of the protagonist's vice with sexual derangement and here, with a suspiciously feminine passivity, could not be more explicit.



Burrows eats the meal Lucy prepares. She has to wait till he goes out to eat the leftover scraps.

In contrast, the figure of Battling Burrows is a study in established norms of masculine dress, gesture, attitudes, and behavior. Every aspect of Burrows' character is heightened so as to make us reflect on the falsity or brutal consequences of those norms. What do we see Burrows doing? In the ring he fights strictly by heavy slugging. After winning, he is proud and struts about. Before the fight he makes faces at his off-screen opponent, juts his chin out, and pounds his gloves up and down on his legs— indicating that he thinks a fight will clearly prove to the whole world who is the "better man."

Back home, he drinks and entertains the advances of a Loose Woman. The signs of her looseness are her activity, her smiling, her friendliness, and her initiative to visit a man in his house. She walks in, hands in her pockets, looks Burrows in the eye, immediately moves over to where he is standing, receives a quick embrace from him, and then goes back out, still looking at him with a flirting look in her eye, presumably having made a date to meet him later.

Burrows' typical posture asserts macho self-confidence in a socially coded way, particularly in terms of cinematic gestures assigned to figures supposedly from the working class. He stands with feet spread apart, lets his eyes sweep around the room possessively, pulls his vest down, puts his hands in his pockets to pull his pants tight across his crotch, and sways back and forth from one foot to another. Such a stance is a way of declaring himself master of a given space, and especially master over the woman in his domestic space.



Postural and gestural cues establish ...

... character in this melodrama.



One of Burrows companions spies on Lucy in the Chinese man's apartment and then ...

When angry, Burrows knocks one fist against the palm of the other hand, and when proclaiming his opinion, he gestures with his hand open and palm down. Although he is characterized as stupid, he is also shown as having the prerogative of having his emotions and opinions respected as law in his house—a witty cinematic comment on just where it is that all of us can observe patriarchy as insane, i.e., within the nuclear family.[7][\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) To portray this man's physical excess, which culminates in his beating his daughter, Griffith has Burrows pick up the chair and swing it around, eat like a pig, throw a spoon at Lucy's rear end, and then oblige her to smile—upon which pathetic act he passes judgment. There are many such gestures of dominance toward Lucy before Burrows beats her. Indeed, all of Burrows' gestures in the film seem to form part of a brutal whole.

Burrows' male friends reinforce for him the rightness of his behavior and attitudes. They form a Boys' Club, something all socially successful men partake of and use to protect their men's rights in a man's world. When the men go to the police station to report Burrows' death, the police's cooperative interaction with them reveals an unusual degree of male cohesiveness, for in another



... tells Burrows about what he had seen, first as a racy tale and then revealing it was about Burrows' own daughter.

context we might expect more of a conflict to be presented between the police and the fight-loving element of a portside slum. The conflicts which Burrows' associates do have function well within the parameters of the boys' club, for the manager only wants the fighter to fight better; and the associates band together to get the woman back for their friend once the joke of telling him about it has been sprung.

In fact, the tale was told to Burrows just as if it were a spicy story of local adultery; the man who had spied on Lucy paced his account to Burrows to arouse Burrows' sexual curiosity, laughter, and contempt for any cuckolded man who would lose a woman to a weakling and a "Chink." In a competitive fashion, his friends found it great fun to see the boxer's chagrin at "losing" both to a girl, his own daughter whom he was supposed firmly to possess, and to a man who seemed Burrows' inferior because that man would not fight and because he was of another race. There is no love between Burrows and his associates but a lot of mutual self-protection, and when they "recover" Lucy, they all assume that Burrows would and should beat her both to assuage his wounded masculine pride and to put her firmly in her place.

Possessing a virgin and a child

Certain perversities in the film are labeled as such by the intertitles and the story line: namely, racism, opium addiction, and physical violence. Yet there are other perversities equally important to the development of the whole film: these are rape, incest, and the seduction of a child. It is testimony to the force of the intertitles and the declared narrative line—the overt story of racism and child abuse—that few critics have looked closely at the specifically sexual perversity of this film.[8] In fact, if we look at the mise-en-scene and composition, in visual terms it is clear that both the brutish father and the gentle, dope-smoking Chinese man "get" the girl. Visually we see both men symbolically consummating sexual contact with Gish. The film allows both men to possess a virgin, indeed, a child.



Burrows beats Lucy with the phallus-like whip.

It seems clear beyond the need for any more elaboration here that Burrows' breaking into the closet with an ax and dragging the cowering Lucy out between the broken boards visually symbolizes rape; indeed, this is one of the most emotionally powerful sequences of sexual assault on film. Yet there are many other indications in the film that Burrows' relation to his daughter is a sexual one. He abuses her for the same reasons and in the same way that a working-class man is supposed to abuse his wife. That is, when the world is down on you, if you are a married man you can always take it out on the wife and kids at home. Aside from one intertitle introducing Lucy, there is no other indication of a father-daughter relation, and all of Burrows' actions toward Lucy would appropriately be those of a man toward a wife.

More explicit in establishing a sexual connotation in Burrows' relation to Lucy is the role of the bed in the visual composition and mise-en-scene. Sometimes, especially when Burrows is alone drinking or with his manager, the composition is toward the room's center, with the bed predominantly visible behind Burrows. When Lucy is alone in the house doing her domestic chores, looking at her treasures, or looking in the mirror, the composition is toward the right side of the room, the domestic corner that includes the hearth. On the opposite side, the bed and closet form an angle, which compositionally becomes a trap.



The first whipping scene.



Whip at penis level.



Connotations of fellatio.



Mise-en-scene of entrapment.



In the final murder sequence, Burrows throws Lucy on the bed.



He beats her to death, on the face with the whip handle.

The first time Burrows beats Lucy, he grabs a whip from under the mattress and stands in the center of the room, holding the whip at penis height. The lighted areas in the composition form a triangle, with the pillow and Lucy's and Burrows' faces forming the triangle's corners, and the whip-phallus aligned midway between the pillow and Lucy's face. Lucy cries, cowers by the door, and clings to the far right wall away from the bed. Burrows is filmed in a symmetrically composed medium-shot, whip prominently in the center, and he points for her to move away from the right wall, that is, toward the direction of the bed. Lucy tries to create a diversion by telling him there is dust on his shoes and bends down to wipe off his shoes with her dress. Here, the change in



The Chinese man faces off to Burrows, as the two men ...

composition from one shot to another connotes the act of fellatio. In the long shot before Lucy wipes the shoes, the whip hangs almost to the floor, but in the close-up of her wiping the shoes, the whip's tail is now at the height of Burrows' penis, and as Lucy raises her face the whip swings past her lips. As Burrows grabs Lucy's arms and throws her toward the bed near the closet, the whip is again between his legs at penis height. We see blurred, orgiastic shots of him beating her senseless. In the final beating sequence, the same connotative devices are repeated, but in a more exaggerated way. Burrows beats Lucy's face with the phallus-like whip handle, and the site of her death is actually on the bed.

Finally, the way Burrows dies emphasizes that his relation to the Chinese man was one of sexual competition after all. When the Chinese man discovers the dead Lucy on the bed and is about to shoot Burrows, both men face off and tacitly acknowledge the other's "manly" challenge that they will fight to the death over the "cause" of this woman. Posing next to a fight poster on the wall and standing with his back to the angle formed by the bed and closet (which was the trap-like locus of Lucy's rape and death), the Chinese man shoots Burrows, discharging the gun when it is held at penis-height.

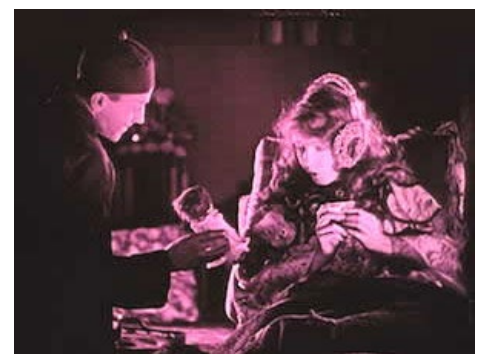
In paradigmatic contrast to sexual violence is the sensual completeness of Lucy's one night at the Chinese man's home. And yet that relation is not only tender and beautiful, but it is also explicitly perverse. We can see this most clearly in the sequence where the Chinese man overcomes his lust just after the girl Lucy has received her first doll. Lucy, wrapped in her new protector's ornate, "womanly" Oriental robe, cuddles the doll with delight. However, her friend with the gentle eyes now wears a look of acquisitive passion, and he is seen moving in on Lucy, his eyes in shadow. Intercut with this sequence are shots of Burrows at his big fight; we see Burrows slugging heavily and an all-male audience, primarily working class, on their feet wildly cheering. When we see the Chinese man and Lucy again, there is fear in her eyes as she clings to the doll. He picks up the hem of her sleeve and kisses that instead, his face moving to the light where we see his illuminated, gentle, ecstatic smile as he goes away.



... tacitly acknowledge their fight to the death over Lucy.



In the Chinese man's room, Lucy smiles for the first time with pleasure.



He gives her her first doll.



She awakens to childhood, maternity, and love all at once.



His desire is filmed as sinister.



He reaches to move closer.



She becomes afraid.



He is sexually menacing ...



... but ends up kissing her sleeve.

Significantly over-apologizing for the man's sexual intent, the intertitle announces: "His love remains a pure and holy thing—even his worst foe says this." In fact, the title makes no sense, because no one at the time knew that Lucy was there, and later her father and his friends just assumed that a sexual relation had been effected.

Griffith seems to use the title to deny the sequence's visual explicitness, yet this very denial creates suspicion about and thus confirms the reality of that sexual passion which the sequence has both presented and repressed. After the Chinese man withdraws, we see Gish examining the sleeve that had been kissed and then stirring in bed. Both gestures indicate the child's emotional, indeed sexual, involvement with this gentle yet seductive man. The visual lushness of this sequence, the child's gestures of preening and of loving the doll, the advances of the Chinese man, and the child's awakening to both maternal and sexual emotion—all these visual details offer a clear erotic message, a message which is then ambiguously denied.



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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Men's options under capitalism



A brute.

Two men, a brute and an effeminate beauty-lover, "get a virgin." That is what I see as the sexual plot of *Broken Blossoms*. What does that mean? What is the power of such a plot? Why did Griffith construct his story that way? First of all, their slum environment, brutality, and opium smoking cast the male protagonists as Others. Griffith safely assigns perversity to other races and to the poor. Onto the working class are displaced Griffith's unconscious, artistic insights about the problems of the nuclear family under capitalism, an understanding he never could have admitted to since he was very much the patriarch, a man who fondly recalled the paternalistic and militaristic values of the Old South and who always had a loving eye for pretty young women.[9] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

In fact, the film presents two key moments of men's lives under capitalism. A man can be socially successful and conventionally masculine, or he can cultivate his sensitivity and imaginative capacity and live as an outsider. Since the last century, middle-class men have had as a model of emotional success either being the "breadwinner" and thus possessor of a home, wife, and family or of being a "free-spirited" (in fact, petit-bourgeois) rebel, usually an artist or intellectual.



A beauty-lover.

Broken Blossoms utilizes and heightens this contrast between these two emotional options traditionally open to middle-class men. It reduces the outlines of these two kinds of male roles to a schematized emblematic form, and it displaces the whole "problem" of masculinity onto a story about the lives of the very poor. The film is thus particularly useful to us as feminist critics to show how popular art transmits patriarchal assumptions, for the roles of the two major male characters not only set out two contrasting sides of a single sexual-political configuration, but the film also makes the emotional implications of each kind of role totally explicit.

The figure of Burrows represents conventional notions of masculinity as enacted by a socially successful man. Within that formula, the corollary to a "real man's" aggressively taking what he can in the social and economic world is his "wearing the pants" at home. That is, he is the boss or the possessor of a wife and family, and his woman must always know her place. In *Broken Blossoms*, Battling Burrows seemingly has no wife, only a daughter. Yet in the figure of Lucy are condensed multiple notions of women's servitude, dependency and helplessness, and reception of sexual abuse.

Women's role in the nuclear family under capitalism was classically described by Frederick Engels using the metaphor of prostitution.[10] Across class lines and cultures and across historical periods, we have sold our bodies for sustenance. Furthermore, the ideological compensations given to "good" women in Western culture—the romantic love myth and the courtly "woman-on-a-pedestal" or Victorian "wife-as-moral-focus" myth—are, as Kate Millet wrote,

"grants which the male concedes out of his total power. Both have the effect of obscuring the patriarchal character of Western culture and, in their general tendency to attribute impossible virtues to



Body language of patriarchal authority and the dependent female's subservience.

women, have ended by confining them in a narrow and often remarkably constricted sphere of behavior."[11]

Symbolically, in *Broken Blossoms*, Lucy functions as the Good Wife. But what is most daring about this film is that it pushes Engels' metaphor of prostitution, used to describe the way women are possessed in the nuclear family, one step further. *Broken Blossoms*' metaphor equates the possession of women in the family with incest. Many works of literature especially from the 19th century on deal with the relation of father-figures and sons as the sons come into their patrimony or make it as self-made men, and this has been a favorite theme in contemporary film (*The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, *Star Wars*, and *The Godfather* immediately come to mind).



A visual metaphor for incest. The closet is the enclosed, temporary refuge ...



... that the brute of a father breaks down.



The bed is the location where ...

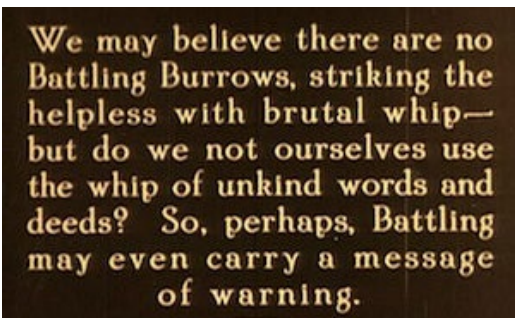


... the father beats the daughter to death with the phallus/whip handle.

But this film is unusual in the way it faces the opposite question, not the coming into patrimony but the servitude of women, a servitude enforced by threats of deprivation emotional bullying, and the potential or actual use of physical force. In *Broken Blossoms* the father rapes his daughter—what does that mean? In Burrows' case, murdering Lucy is clearly the ultimate abuse of his prideful



Burrows and his friends in a bar where they plan revenge. The boy's club exerts its social power.



We know the Brute is bad, but is the film an anti-racist text?

masculinity. In real life, we know that on the individual level rape is not an act of sexual desire but one of possession.[12] And on the social level, as Susan Brownmiller points out, rape is analogous to lynching; it is an act supposedly committed by *lumpen* proletarian men or a crazy few, but in fact rape performs a more general social function as a reminder and brutal enforcer of women's "place." [13]

When we take the second half of the term, "the father rapes his daughter," and ask what *incest* means to the sexual-political structure underlying the film, we arrive at the same answer—*possession*. The challenge to patriarchy that this film poses (or can pose through a feminist reading) is the following: If a man's social world consists primarily of a boys' club, of a nexus of economic and power relations conducted principally among men, how can a man ever set his daughters free or even conceive of what their freedom might mean? For the emotional implication *Broken Blossoms* dares to draw out is that for a man to be the possessor at home means to be incestuous toward his girl children as well as toward his wife.[14]

Griffith is perfectly clear about Burrows' excesses and morally righteous in disliking abusive masculinity, here safely assigned to the working class. We all see what Burrows is like and know why the brute is wrong. More interesting to me, and more ambiguous, is Burrows' complement, the Chinese man. On the superficial level, the film is an antiracist text, but the film says nothing from an Asian person's point of view, just as it says nothing from a woman's point of view. The images of the East, of Buddhism, of racial traits, and of an oppressed person's reaction to oppression are all drawn from hegemonic, white stereotypes. In fact, not only is Griffith working only with received opinions and prejudices about Asians, women, and the working class, but when he sets up his basic opposition of brute vs. sensitive man, he is working with a set of oppositions that have nothing to do with race.

The man of action vs. the sensitive outsider

What are these oppositions set up by the use of two contrasting male figures—the boxer and the opium smoker? The one character is a violent, selfish, insensitive man of action. Burrows moves with large gestures and commands a large space wherever he is. He is self-assured and demanding, even to the point of being physically and emotionally destructive to others around him. The other male figure in the film is a gentle, altruistic lover of beauty. He is a soft person, often emotionally paralyzed into inaction. He burns up his days in reverie and opium. But even though he would waste himself with drugs, he is basically fatherly and tender, totally self-sacrificing for a child-woman that he would wish to, but cannot, possess. Furthermore, he understands the hypocrisy of most social values in the capitalist West, his solution to that is to surround his own life with beauty and otherwise to withdraw. In his love life, the yearning is all.

The character whom Griffith can demean by calling "Chinky" has all the traits of a male cultural persona which has been valorized in Western literature for several centuries now—a persona Griffith himself surely must have identified with. "Chinky" is no less than our old friend, the romantic hero. He is the sensitive lover of beauty and the pursuer of unattainable women. The Chinese man could have stepped right out of Thomas DeQuincy's *The Opium Eater*, and it is indeed likely that the author of *Limehouse Nights* was influenced by DeQuincy's depiction of London poverty and a young man's opium addiction and friendship with a girl waif.

That Griffith, the artist who always thought of himself and his role in idealized terms, identified with the Chinese man can be seen in the way that *Broken Blossoms*' plot and mise-en-scene constantly valorize the young man's



"Do not give blows for blows. The Buddha says: 'What thou dost not want others to do to thee, do thou not to others'."

The Romantic Hero.

tenderness, aesthetic sensibility, and moral superiority. Indeed, all the Chinese man's virtues are conflated in a romantic way: to recognize beauty and to surround oneself with beautiful things are indices of moral superiority that those enmeshed in the workaday world do not recognize. Only artists, fellow outsiders, and women can recognize such a virtue for its worth.

To carry my analysis of sexual politics in *Broken Blossoms* one step further, I think we should ask why this figure is characteristically male and what his social role is. In fact, the romantic hero and the sensitive outsider (or, to use a more familiar equivalent, the filmmaker and the professors of literature and film)—these people have a specific class position under capitalism; their chance to *choose* that position is the escape valve that capitalism allows for dissatisfied male members of its petite bourgeoisie. To put it schematically, there are three roles available to men in capitalist society—to be an outsider, a worker, or a boss.

If you pursue profit and power, you also exploit others. To avoid facing that, you have to dull your emotional sensibility as you move up in social position. That is what *Duddy Kravitz*, *Godfather II*, and *Room at the Top* are all about. The capitalist has to believe that the profit motive serves society the best and cannot look with regret either at how he is exploiting others or at how his emotional and social forms of interacting with others might be better. Possession and dominance become embedded in a way of life.

Or a man may be a worker, putting in time at a stultifying job for a weekly paycheck, suffering humiliation both from superiors at work and from the threat of unemployment and/or illness—the threat of not being able to take care of one's own. For both male workers and bosses, most of whom are male, there are many reasons why men continue to suffer from rigid notions of sex roles, emotional paralysis, moral compromise, and a crippling of the imagination—and also why they oppress women.

The one "out" that has traditionally been offered to men since the last century has been to be the artist, the outsider, the rebel. This person has the insight and the inner drive to reject social respectability and emotional sterility. He can turn to creating art, living alone in nature, or taking drugs—often doing all these at once. Instead of pursuing money, success, and power in bourgeois terms, the romantic hero idealistically lives by virtues that seem to be precluded if one searches for social success: these virtues include creativity, passion, love, authenticity, honesty, sincerity, beauty, innocence, spontaneity, and contemplation of nature. At the same time, the romantic hero in his self-gazing is also like Hamlet, often paralyzed into inaction, usually ineffective, yearning for the unattainable woman, and inevitably self-destructive. That this is a male role can be seen from the fact that the rebel goes off to the woods or into drugs, but not back into the domestic sphere to raise small children. That has just not been one of the options that men have commonly imagined for themselves.[15]

Displacement

Furthermore, Griffith's "ruse" of using the Asian man as the romantic hero hides the social reality of racism. The romantic hero is more like Griffith's image



The Yellow Man watched Lucy often. The beauty which all Limehouse missed smote him to the heart.

The outsider and the waif.

of himself; Griffith wrote that he sought to live by the pen as a way of identifying with his earlier and most beloved image of his father, that is, of a man brandishing a sword (and in fact, it was brandishing a sword against a Black servant to teach the man his place).[16] When Griffith came of age in the South, the illustrious days of the Civil War and family prosperity were for him sadly a part of the legendary past. To be a writer was for Griffith to find a more modern, petit bourgeois way of being a real man in a culture not instinctively his own, of being socially functional yet still maintaining his felt identity as an Outsider, and of devoting himself to Creativity and Art.[17]

Perhaps reacting against the charges of racism that *Birth of A Nation* had provoked, Griffith clearly wanted *Broken Blossoms* to be considered anti-racist, but the film represses all understanding of the real mechanisms of racism. Griffith did not embed his depiction of doomed interracial love within an artistic structure that would clarify our understanding of race and racial oppression. Instead, he assigned to the Asian man the traits of his own class, that element of the petite bourgeoisie who feel themselves as individuals to be above economic and social constraints—sensitive outsiders morally superior to the bosses and brutes.

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



He saves her but then ...



... almost kisses her.



If the artistic structure of *Broken Blossoms* deals only superficially with race, it deals profoundly with sexual politics, especially masculinity. In particular, it implies that all three "types" of men under capitalism will desire the same type of woman—the unattainable woman or nonsexually active one.[18] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] Battling Burrows represents the "family man." Because he is an entrepreneur, an aggressive boxer, he represents the self-made man, and because of his economic level, he also represents the working class. Thus Griffith has condensed onto the figure of Burrows traits of both the capitalist and the worker. In this context, Burrows possesses his blonde virgin and good wife and child within the context of a man's possession of his family. As I mentioned before, Griffith condensed and displaced all his notions of the potential evil of family life onto the figure of a lower class man both for his own protection and that of his audience. Similarly, projected onto the figure of the Chinese man are all the traits of the romantic hero, living only for the pursuit and never living out the fulfillment.

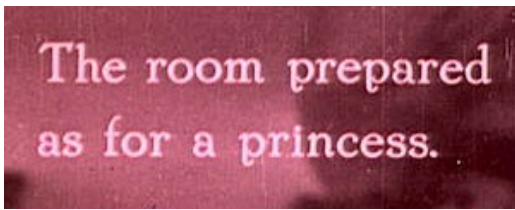
The woman that both men need, each for different reasons, is played by Gish in a way that collapses virgin, child, and wife all into the same role. For the father, she is the traditional good woman and also the virgin child. For the Chinese romantic hero, she is like Faust's Gretchen and DeQuincy's waif or even Werther's Lotte—a figure desirable from afar.

When I first saw *Broken Blossoms*, I asked myself, what does it mean that both men have to get a virgin? Griffith's emblematic schema of the sexual possibilities for men in the West, that is, under capitalism, makes the answer clear. The men in the film live in a world of men, and Burrows embraces that world while the Chinese rejects it. None of the men in the film can enter into or even imagine a world where women are sexually active, initiators and agents of actions and decisions, and bearers of social power.

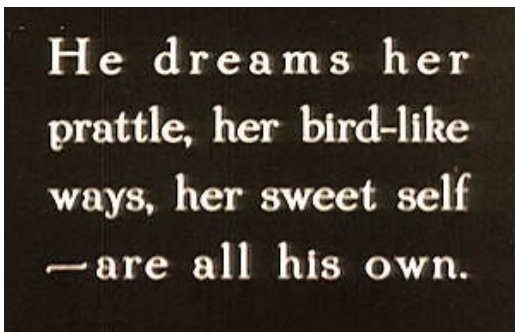
Coming to the same conclusion, but in a contrasting way, G.W. Pabst's silent film *Pandora's Box* also took up the theme of the capitalist's and the romantic hero's sexual decisions, but that film traced the fate of two men who aligned themselves with the seductress, the dark woman. Lulu, played by the dark-haired Louise Brooks, was the mirror opposite of Gish—a destroyer of men and the bearer of chaos. In *Broken Blossoms*, the function of the good woman, the virginal woman, is to be put on a pedestal and yearned for, and after marriage or within the family, she is to be possessed. It is not Lucy's own vision, for Griffith early included scenes that showed Lucy losing all illusions about her future as a woman, either in marriage or as a prostitute.

That all the main characters must die at the end of *Broken Blossoms* and that the sexual-political situation as Griffith presents it is so static and despairing is no accident. Griffith presents a sparse yet emotionally charged outline of what happens when men cling to established norms of masculinity or rebel against those norms as a romantic hero would. *Broken Blossoms* has the vision to present both kinds of emotional possibilities which men in capitalist culture can allow themselves as, at worst, murderous in their consequences, and, at best, as crippling to men and oppressive to women.

A woman viewer's response



He is the first person to offer Lucy love.



He dreams of possession.

To conclude, I would like to try to analyze why I liked the film. First, as I pointed out, Griffith's films have many ways to pacify our superego while promulgating a racist and sexist ideology. *Broken Blossoms'* intent seems to be to combat racism. The fact that the Chinese man has the outlook of the romantic hero more than the point of view of someone from a non-white race does not at first seem racist, since the romantic hero has long been a figure women have found sympathetic. Sheila Rowbotham in *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World* spoke for my whole generation when she exposed the basic infantile selfishness of that figure as encountered by women in real life, but even so the sensitive, often androgynous man in fiction still has his appeal. Men authors give him "womanly" virtues and also a man's right to be agent of his own destiny. *Broken Blossoms* takes a clear stand against violence and male brutality, and, in the figure of the Chinese man, it valorizes male tenderness, gentleness, and appreciation of beauty and innocence. No matter how many times I see the film, its simple praise for virtues I too prize in men comes through with an emotional power.

For most viewers, the other side of that message, that Brutality is Wrong, is conveyed not through the caricature of masculinity as enacted by Donald Crisp as Battling Burrows but through the pathos elicited by Lillian Gish. *Broken Blossoms* established Gish's critical reputation and was part of a series of films Griffith made in this period that looked lovingly at the small detail and at Woman in the domestic sphere. Griffith's films were famous for their female roles, and Griffith was admired for the performances he drew from actresses and the way he filmed them. *Broken Blossoms*, for example, featured Griffith's first use of the irregular "Sartov" lens, which resulted in his dramatically exploiting from then on softly-blurred close-ups of Gish.[19] It was also one of the first commercial films in the U.S. to be promoted successfully as high art. [20]

Although our attention is constantly being drawn to Gish, she is not playing a woman seen on women's terms or from a woman's point of view. Her role is reduced to the depiction of a Virgin, a "vision" of women often manipulated in male, or rather, patriarchal, art. Within the narrative structure, the figure of Lucy is a term or a marker in a male story about male concerns.

The critical question that remains unresolved for me as a feminist viewer is this: Where does Lucy's pathos, which affects me so strongly, derive from? Are my eyes constantly on Lucy in the way that a male viewer's would be, insofar as traditional feature films constantly have us look at woman as objects in stories told through men's eyes?[21] Do I or can I stay on the film's surface and admire it as anti-racist and/or as Art? Do I respond to the figure of Lucy primarily because I appreciate this virtuoso film role for an actress, one that demands a range from childlike ingenuousness to complete hysteria? By extension, do I admire more of Griffith's films for such roles and for women's acting in them?

Most students I have taught remember specific Griffith films in terms of "what happens" to the female lead and in terms of the actresses' performances. *Broken Blossoms* is seemingly "about" Lucy's plight, her moment of love, and her murder. The surface emphasis on Lucy's story is enhanced both by Gish's acting and the close-ups of her face and glowing hair. Such an emphasis on the waif Lucy gives the film an appeal to both men and women. Although, for me, the device of Lucy's making a smile with her fingers is repulsively saccharine, the way Gish captures Lucy's limited emotional experience and the way her figure is filmed seem so "right" for this sad tale. For example, Griffith brilliantly assigns Gish the prop of a doll to represent Lucy's awakening to her childhood, sexuality, and maternal emotion all at once, and then he maintains a visual emphasis on the child clinging to that doll while she is attacked in the closet. While seemingly fixed in a rigid stance, Gish can let her eyes, posture, or



The doll is a brilliant prop, later used effectively when Gish cowers in the closet before Burrows kills her.



Her pathos calls out to me. I want to protect her.



Angela Carter compares this waif to de Sade's Justine, understanding the play in *Broken Blossoms* between sexuality and childishness.

fluttering hands express a whole range of emotions, and when she is attacked in the closet, she can let her body totally respond to the hysteria of impending death.[22]

Gish draws us in and holds us, and our sympathy at the child's plight both pacifies our superego and assures us that such things happen only to poor waifs and not to us. The other drama, that of masculinity and of men's need to get a virgin, is enacted on a level of the film which I think many people can observe but which goes by relatively uncommented on either by the overt story line or by the intertitles. And on this level, the film leads us all to participate in Lucy's rape by her father and her seduction by the Chinese man, the seduction in fact of a child who has just been given her first doll.

The film depicts interracial love yet hides the ways it makes that love "safe." It protests male brutality yet draws us into male violence and child-abuse. I cannot speak for a Third World person's reaction to the film's ambiguous combination of anti-racism and racism. I do know that, as a feminist, it is my being drawn into cinematic depictions of this kind of sexual perversion that disturbs me the most. It seems a gauge of my own colonized mind.

Lucy's pathos draws me into identifying with a cinematic depiction of woman as victim.[23] On the one hand, as a viewer, I want to protect this girl as a motherless child. Her helplessness calls out to me. As a girl and also as a woman, I have both felt helplessness (even been addicted to it) and nurtured others from helplessness to independence (the teacher's role, the lover's role, the mothering role that I have learned in my female socialization).

On the other hand, *Broken Blossoms'* patriarchal, extreme depiction of father-daughter relations also reflects my own internalized and eroticized fears of male authority, dominance, and control—fears that also derive from my girlhood in this culture. I have to ask myself: In what ways as a viewer do I "participate" in Lucy's brutalization and rape? I know how many levels of culture (from the structure of language to the structures of fiction to the structures of the economy) operate in a way that would encourage me to eroticize female submission.[24] In her key work on the presentation of women in male pornography, Angela Carter compares *Broken Blossoms* to de Sade's *Justine*:

"Sometimes this waif, as in Griffith's *Broken Blossoms*, is as innocently erotic and as hideously martyred as Justine herself, and as a sexual icon, the abused waif allows the customer to have his cake and glut himself upon it, too. She could be as enticing in her vulnerability and ringletted prettiness as she was able but the audience knew all the time that the lovely child before them was a mature woman whom the fiction of her childishness made taboo. The taboo against acknowledging her sexuality created the convention that the child could not arouse desire; if she did so, it was denied. A sentimental transformation turned the denial of lust into a kitsch admiration of the 'cute.'"[25]

Carter discussed the mechanism of denial in terms of male spectators' response to Gish's roles. I would also apply that mechanism to my own response. My



Father-daughter relation: Burrows cannot stand seeing Lucy in the Chinese man's bed.

response may include a denial of "lust"—i.e., my own erotic reaction to my preferred female stars. But more clearly, Gish's role as waif-woman both elicits my own Oedipal fears and fantasies and allows me to deny them. The extremity of Lucy's condition allows me to deny that there is an internalized, "masochistic" drama of the brutalized girl child that I, the mature woman, still carry around with me emotionally. Furthermore, Gish, acting the desired and abused girl, represents the vision I as a "good girl" had to have of my sexuality—it was there but denied, and I long thought that its destiny was to be possessed. [26]

Broken Blossoms openly teaches that its configuration of male dominance/female submission is destructively perverse. Do woman viewers who identify strongly with Gish's role sense that *Broken Blossoms* has artistically presented their own problems in such a way that it has brought sexual-political problems to the surface for conscious consideration? I suspect not. As a viewer, pathos has overwhelmed me. When I identify with women on the screen as victims, it is difficult to move away from "feeling" to a more active, self-aware response.



The abused child.



The desired child/woman.

Even with this caveat, my response to *Broken Blossoms* is ambiguous. I cannot help but admire it. In a visual style fully adequate to expressing the complex interrelations between romantic striving and male brutishness, the film offers us a symbolically complete, although schematized and condensed, representation of masculine options under capitalism. Like most bourgeois, patriarchal narrative art, it provides a social and superego "cover" for its viewers so that they can immerse themselves in its flow. Yet here the "cover" is so honorable and so exhaustive (high art, anti-racism, anti-child abuse, male idealism and tenderness pitted against brutishness, female pathos and admirable woman's screen role) that, below its manifest content, *Broken Blossoms* demystifies the romantic hero as a semi-paralyzed pursuer of unattainable ideals and creates a daring metaphor to describe the patriarch's possessive role in the nuclear family in terms of incest.

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Notes

1. How films assign characters recognizable traits and how connotations are "readable" in film because they are reinforced in the action and in the narrative development are two topics I deal with extensively in the following articles, where I apply the methodology of Roland Barthes' *S/Z* to film: "S/Z and *Rules of the Game*," *Jump Cut*, Nos. 12-13 (Winter 1976-77); "Teaching the Comparative Analysis of Novels and Films," *Style*, 9 (Fall 1975).

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2. For a discussion of the mechanisms of *condensation* and *displacement* in Hollywood film, see Charles Eckert, "The Anatomy of a Proletarian Film: Warner's *Marked Woman*," *Film Quarterly*, 17, No. 2 (Winter 1973-74).

3. Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (New York: Avon, 1970) deals precisely with this topic and remains a model of feminist criticism that moves fluidly back and forth from historical to literary analysis.

4. The historical background given here comes from Vance Kepley, Jr. "Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* and the Problem of Historical Specificity," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, 3, No. 1 (Winter 1978).

5. Kepley, p. 41.

6. Charles Affron, "The Actress as Metaphor: Gish in *Broken Blossoms*," *Star Acting* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1977), p. 12.

7. I use the term "insane" in the sense of a *system of oppression*. R.D. Laing in *The Politics of the Family* (New York: Random House, 1969) views this systematic oppression from a psychological perspective. Rayna Rapp offers an analysis of the family from a multi-class, social and economic perspective in "Family and Class in Contemporary America: Notes toward an Understanding of Ideology," *University of Michigan Papers in Women's Studies*, Special Issue, May 1978. And Lillian Breslow Rubin in *Worlds of Pain: Life in the Working-Class Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1976) presents through interviews a poignant and telling analysis of the systematic deformation of emotional life in white working-class families in the United States.

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8. The major exception is Marjorie Rosen, whose discussion of "Griffith's Girls" in *Popcorn Venus* (New York: Avon Books, 1973) inspired me to go back and take another look at Griffith from a feminist point of view.

9. Marjorie Rosen; Gary Gordon, "The Story of David Wark Griffith" (a biography of Griffith based on interviews), *Photoplay* (June and July 1916), excerpted in *Focus on D.W. Griffith*, ed. Harry Geduld (New York: Prentice Hall, 1971). [[return to page 3](#)]
10. Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (New York: International Publishers, 1967.)
11. Kate Millett, pp. 60-61, citing the work of Hugo Beigel.
12. For a discussion of feminist cinematic treatment of rape, see Lesage, "Disarming Rape: JoAnn Elam's *Rape*," *Jump Cut*, No. 19 (Winter 1978).
13. Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975).
14. Some readers may find this conclusion outrageous, so I shall add a few examples from daily life. We have all observed fathers' discomfiture at the thought of their daughters' sexual activity; at the same time male adolescent children are excused for "sowing wild oats." And with girls of a younger age, when a father yells, "Wipe that lipstick off your face" or challenges, "Where were you so late?" his reaction is a sexually as well as paternally possessive one. It is the sexual connotation of the girl's action that is disturbing to him, and his excuse for his reaction is often that he knows "how men are."
15. For a psychoanalytic explanation of the cross-cultural and trans. historical division of male and female roles into the "public" and the "domestic" sphere, see Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).
16. D.W. Griffith, "My Early Life," in Geduld, ed., p. 33. That such an act was a lesson in masculinity as well as racism is implied in Griffith's comment that his father winked at the terrified child to assure him all was a joke. What was the black servant feeling? Griffith's inability to ask that question in relating this, his most sacred memory, parallels his inability to depict the real mechanisms of racism in *Broken Blossoms* or *Birth of a Nation*.
17. D.W. Griffith, "My Early Life," in Geduld, ed., p. 35.
18. Kate Millett traces the close relation between an esteem for virginity and the fear and desire that women provoke as the "dark force," seen as part of uncontrolled nature and destructive to male-defined culture. (*Sexual Politics*, pp. 72-82). Thus, a paradigmatic variation to *Broken Blossoms* in the treatment of the nuclear family in fictional film is to depict a dark-haired siren destroying families and individual men and social cohesion. [[return to page 4](#)]
19. Lillian Gish and Billy Bitzer, in their respective autobiographies, describe the introduction of the Sartov lens; Gish discovered this flattering way of being photographed and promoted it after she first had her passport picture done by Sartov. Lillian Gish (with Ann Pinchot), *The Movies, Mr. Griffith, and Me* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1969); G.W. Bitzer, *G.W. Billy Bitzer, His Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1973).

20. For a discussion of how *Broken Blossoms* was exploited commercially as high art, see Arthur Lenning, "D.W. Griffith and the Making of an Unconventional Masterpiece," *Film Journal*, 1, No. 3-4.

21. Key essays on this subject are Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen*, 16, No. 3 (Fall 1975), and Pam Cook and Claire Johnston, "The Place of Women in the Cinema of Raoul Walsh," *Raoul Walsh*, ed. Phil Hardy (London: Vineyard Press, 1974). A discussion among feminist critics that deals extensively with the subject of how women are presented in dominant male cinema and how this affects us as women viewers can be found in "Women and Film: A Discussion of Feminist Aesthetics," *New German Critique*, No. 13 (Winter 1978).

22. Charles Affron's *Star Acting* provides a good formal analysis of this sequence.

23. For discussions of the adverse effects of presenting woman as victim in a portrait intended to elicit audience sympathy, see my article, "Disarming Rape" and Charles Kleinhans, "Seeing through Cinema Verite: *Wanda* and *Marilyn Times Five*," *Jump Cut*, No. 1 (May-June 1974).

24. Ellen E. Morgan, "The Eroticization of Male Dominance and Female Submission," *University of Michigan Papers in Women's Studies*, 2, No. 1 (September 1975).

25. Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), p. 60.

26. See my extended discussion of *Celine And Julie Go Boating* and that film's relation to female fantasies in "Subversive Fantasies," *Jump Cut*, No. 23/24 (Spring 1981).

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Special section: activist counter-cinema

Introduction: *Jump Cut* 40th

by Chuck Kleinhans

Part one: back to the roots

Jump Cut celebrated its 40th year of publication in 2014, and anniversaries are always occasions for nostalgia, reassessment, and celebration. We had a bit of each by running a workshop at the 2014 annual conference at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies in Seattle. It began soberly with the three founding co-editors (Julia Lesage, John Hess, and myself) making some brief remarks and then it was moved to celebratory hi-jinx as our two Canadian compatriots, Tom Waugh and Peter Steven, spoke. So much for taking ourselves too seriously.



Workshoppers at the March 2014 Society for Cinema Studies meeting in Seattle: *Jump Cut* authors and editors.

But, of course, there are always some serious matters to address. At this time, the end of 2014, and with the embers still glowing from Ferguson Missouri, Gaza, Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement, U.S. right wing hysteria around child migration and Ebola, the increasing evidence of catastrophic human effects on the planet's environment, the persistent blowback of U.S. intervention in the Middle East and so forth, the logic and necessity of a political radical analysis of media remains more pertinent than ever.

Given *Jump Cut*'s long dedication to considering both a critique of the media mainstream and commitment to an activist alternative, it makes sense to reconsider where we've come from and what we've learned in the process. And it's useful to cluster together several pieces that evaluate what is going on with an activist counter-cinema today.

To begin there's a reprint of a piece that Julia Lesage and I wrote a few years after starting *Jump Cut*. 1977's "Marxism and Film Criticism: The Current Situation" was written for likeminded friends in adjoining fields and for a kind of survey assessment taking place in *The Minnesota Review*. Various radicals, members of the nondogmatic and nonsectarian left, were discussing how intellectuals could contribute to a progressive movement in the wake of the Civil Rights, Anti-War, anti-imperialist and counterculture waves of the 60s and building with the emerging feminist and queer movements. Julia and I were trying to assess the resources and the terrain and project a future direction.

From a slightly later moment, in the 1980s, we reprint Peter Steven's introduction to his anthology, *Jump Cut: Hollywood and Counter Cinema*. The collection of articles from the first decade or so highlighted both the active study of Hollywood and other commercial entertainment cinemas as ideological instances of the capitalist order, but also and equally important, the alternatives—Third World cinema, activist documentaries and experimental art films, films in close relation with political movements and actions, and the growth of a sophisticated and artful understanding of the dominant system. And always the goal was to see the complications of the scene: the often-progressive side of mainstream media, and the need for a hearty (and hopefully productive) political critique of left-leaning creative work.

We also reprint here the introduction to David James' *Sons and Daughters of Los: Culture and Community in L.A.*, his edited anthology on alternative arts in Los Angeles. Parallel to his pioneering survey on radical North American cinema in the long 1960s, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties*, and his acute in-depth discussion of the long history of alternative cinema practices within the heartland of the Hollywood system, *The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas In Los Angeles*, James' unfortunately orphaned essay deserves attention for cogently arguing for the importance of grassroots alternatives for truly politically progressive and radical artwork. In a time when "radical" is too often confused with the idea of a single artist gallery show with some moving image screen pieces on the walls, and documentarists want to jump start their careers with feature length works that can be booked into multiplexes, it's worth returning to the

source of political and social movements: ordinary people facing off against another manifestation of neo-liberalism. Or to put it another way if you're going to make a revolution, you have to do it with the people who are present and accounted for, not with some fantasy projection, or dream of the artist as intrepid leader.

Part two: the radical present

We've grouped together several articles addressing the possibilities of a radical activist cinema today. *Jump Cut* has always been especially devoted to trying to think through creative work produced in the present moment while seeing the connections to the historical past of political media struggles and anticipating the changing and complex needs of social and political times. Julia Lesage reflects on the constant renewal of the radical use of documentary for social change by arguing for a multi-faceted complexity in making. Ernie Larsen discusses the longterm work of curating and exhibition that he has done with Sherry Millner. By screening radical political work they found provocation, and sometimes unexpected results, in the after screening situation. Chuck Kleinhans asks what is really subversive by interrogating a rap music video built around "riot porn" images. And Angela Aguayo extends the discussion with an extended discussion of activist street tapes, particularly the now-classic *This is What Democracy Looks Like* covering the Seattle WTO protests. Chris Robé continues the analysis based on his ongoing historical study of activist media from the 1960s to the present.

In future issues we will continue this discussion, covering both old and new work.

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Marxism and film criticism: the current situation (1977)

by Chuck Kleinhans and Julia Lesage

Reprinted from *The Minnesota Review*, No. 8 (spring 1977),
pp.146-149.

Preface

This essay was written partly by request from people working in and around *The Minnesota Review*, an established literary journal, moving leftward. Chuck had been in discussions with some folks wondering if the Popular Culture Association might be a place where a wider range of politics and cultural issues could be presented. *New German Critique* was getting underway, but had a fairly defined scope of Central European studies. The Modern Language Association was in one way broad and had been revived by some progressive and radical efforts, but it definitely remained bound by deep-seeded department level resistance to popular culture and visual media. Julia had been involved with the pioneering feminist journal, *Women & Film*, and both of us had founded *Jump Cut* along with John Hess in 1974. We were asked to address what the field of film studies, clearly emerging and containing some very exciting new work, and increasingly getting a foothold in Marxist cultural analysis, could contribute to a vigorous cultural and aesthetic analysis.

We wrote it as a basic introduction, with an eye to both left political thinkers in the new post-Vietnam War era, and to people in the broad area of cultural studies, which we saw as covering both the British “Birmingham School” and the U.S. American Studies and intellectual journalism on current and emerging trends. We wanted to convey our own enthusiasm and the excitement of working on something new and original, unbound by static and conventional thought.

Marxism and film criticism: the current situation (1977)

Film criticism is notoriously uneven. Marxist film criticism is no exception. In part the erratic development of critical film study by both Marxists and non-

Marxists can be explained by a number of unique problems. First, there are many types and forms of and uses for film—from technical and education shorts to feature fictional entertainments, from documentaries to avant-garde experiments—as a result, "film" describes a medium, not a unitary object of study; it is closer to "book" than to "literature." Second, in contrast to writing or painting, filmmaking is almost always an expensive, collaborative effort—more like theatrical performance than dramatic text. Thereby film criticism demands an economic and sociological analysis of production and reception as well as a close study of the work, director, genre and period. The object of study itself is elusive: film "texts" are altered physically by bad projection, fading color dyes, erratic repairs, and many other difficulties. Individually variant texts are a given. This problem is compounded when a 35 millimeter film is available for study only in the small image size of a 16 millimeter print. In addition, ordinary projection means a limited way of looking at film: until recently very few have been able to work with the expensive editing table facilities crucial for close study.

Film is still so new that there are arguments on such fundamental questions as what film is. For example, the basic aim of Christian Metz's widely discussed and debated book, *Language and Cinema*, is to define cinema and film. In addition, the establishment of a canon for film scholars and critics is itself problematic in a field where the division of mass and high culture is questionable, if not invalid (which is Chaplin?). And the very diversity of film as a medium leaves it open to an inherently interdisciplinary approach since its specialists come from sociology, art history, literature, mass communications, cultural history, technical filmmaking, etc.

However, all these "problems" present an immense advantage for Marxists. Relative to the other arts, film provides an open field with no significant tradition to battle, but rather an immense range of texts and approaches and an uncertain canon. Film has an inherently collective mode of production and a relatively close relation to the economic base and to other parts of the social superstructure. It is open to interdisciplinary approaches, and the Marxist critic can communicate with a fairly wide range of readers without recourse to the academic stylistics of the established disciplines.

Marxist film criticism has one great strength: the body of early Soviet films. Both experimental and Marxist, these films give the critic a constant reference point. But such uneven Marxist film criticism as there is has tended to focus on the realist tradition in film as the norm without noticing the ideological biases inherent in realism. (It is only in the late 60's that film's version of Bertolt Brecht and Georg Lukács' debate over realism began in earnest.) The attraction to realism is partially due to the fact that politically progressive filmmakers, such as those from the French Popular Front, Joris Ivens, the British documentarists, and the Italian neorealists, took as a given that a certain kind of "realist" cinematic narrative and visual continuity was most apt for making films about (and sometimes for) the proletariat. Most seriously, Marxists have overlooked the tradition of agit-prop films—those films made to directly contribute to a political struggle. To some extent this neglect can be attributed to the highly topical nature of such films, but the lessons for present radical criticism and film making are frequently missed.

At present, Marxist film criticism stands at a particularly important point in relation to Marxist aesthetics and cultural theory. Traditionally, Marxism has tended to either ignore mass art such as film, or to condemn it out of hand for not matching European conceptions of high culture. However, this neglect has also allowed recent Marxist film criticism to rapidly assimilate post-Leninist trends: for example, Walter Benjamin's concept of the industrial production of culture, Bertolt Brecht's critique of bourgeois and Soviet realism, and Antonio Gramsci's analysis of ideological hegemony.

The current renaissance of Marxist film criticism began in France. The early and middle 60s saw an intellectual flourishing of a revived Marxism, along with structuralism, semiology, and psychoanalysis. In that ambiance, the general strike of May-June 68 caused certain key filmmakers and critics to define themselves and their work as specifically Marxist. *Positif*, the lone left film magazine of the 50s and 60s, was joined by the prestigious *Cahiers du cinéma* when the latter's editorial board went left. Both were outflanked on the left by a new publication, *Cinéthique*, which followed a French Maoist line. *Cinéthique* criticized bourgeois film form, analyzed the economics of the French film industry and state and institutional controls over film, and explained and applied Louis Althusser's Marxist analysis of ideology to film. In 1972 *Cahiers* followed *Cinéthique*'s Maoist example.

Key in this entire shift was the example of Jean-Luc Godard, and his partner during the period, Jean-Pierre Gorin. They produced a series of militant 16 millimeter films which were not only Marxist in content, but examples of the critics' call for a specifically political "deconstruction" of narrative forms, especially melodrama. One aspect of both Godard and Gorin's films and the film criticism of that period was to apply a Brechtian type of critique to militant films which depended on realism and identification, now seen as part of bourgeois film form.

The complex, intense explosion of Marxist film criticism seems obtuse to many not familiar with the French intellectual scene, where a knowledge of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Christian Metz, as well as a working acquaintance with Marxism is taken for granted. While these thinkers are not Marxists, their work is in many ways materialist and compatible with Marxism. Barthes, for example, has devoted his career to an examination of bourgeois cultural ideology. The context of this criticism is also political and includes a rejection of the two previously dominant left influences, the French Communist Party "humanist" position and Sartre's engagé criticism, and an acceptance of the Chinese Cultural Revolution as it could be applied to France. Critics and filmmakers also have fought the strict, direct government control of all the media in France. For example, some films dealing with Algeria and all the militant films of the '68 events are still unlicensed.

As a result, French criticism seems to deal with a strange canon of films and offers critical perspectives which are on the correct track, but crude or limited. The influential *Cahiers* "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism" essay and explication of bourgeois ideology in John Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln* (translated in *Screen* (UK) Spring 71, Summer 71, Spring 72 and Autumn 72, respectively) are suggestive but hardly models. Ground-breaking materialist analyses of the

ideology of deep focus cinematography by Jean-Patrick Lebel, Jean-Louis Comolli, and *Cinéthique* followed a French interest in examining ideology at the "point of production of meaning"—again, a fruitful, but also limited, idea.

Some French secondary school film books and other film publications, especially those appealing to the numerous cineclubs, have taken up Marxist and semiological concepts: e.g., *Image et son*, *Cinéma 70* (71, 72, etc), *Ecran 70...*, and *Jeune cinéma*. One also finds the popular press and mainstream arts and letters publications regularly writing on film and politics. Even the French Communist Party's staid *La Nouvelle critique*, which has held onto traditional realist perspectives in the arts, began in 1972 to deal with semiology with Michel Marie's long review of Metz's *Language and Cinema* and a three-critic review of Godard and Gorin's feature, *Tout va bien*.

In Anglo-American film criticism, reception of the French activities has been uneven. Facing the hostility of the older establishment's impressionism and historicism and the younger establishment's auteurism (an idealist exaltation of the director as singular creator), those outside of the orthodoxy have tended to split in three directions: taking over semiology as a new formalism, rejecting it as bizarre obscurantism, or uneasily combining semiology and Marxism. In the early 70s, *Screen*, under the editorship of Sam Rohdie, moved away from British establishment criticism to introduce into English criticism articles on semiotics, the *Cahiers* and *Cinéthique* perspectives, Russian Formalism, and Brecht. It provided translations, commentaries, and some examples of applied criticism, in a characteristically eclectic mix. For the past two years, Ben Brewster, English translator of Althusser, held editorship, but editorial interest has shifted to the new French psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan rather than dialectical materialism. However Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, translator of Gramsci, has just assumed the editorship and a new direction may be forthcoming.

Afterimage, an infrequent but important British publication, has reflected an alliance of Marxism and the avant-garde. Developing out of their interest in popular and mass culture, *Working Papers in Cultural Studies* (U. of Birmingham), has applied Marxist cultural theory—both British and French—to a close study of contemporary British working class culture and to British film. The group is especially notable for its range, interest in ideology, and recognition of the critiques of the feminist movement.

The development of Marxist film criticism in the United States is linked to the struggles of the 60s and 70s, and the radical critiques of dominant culture which emerged from the Movement (especially from blacks and Third World people, women, gays, and the counterculture), and the emergence of a new, primarily documentary, agit-prop strain of filmmaking with the New Leftish Newsreel network. The greatest strength of U.S. Marxist film criticism is its close relationship to specific political efforts and its breadth, especially in understanding imperialism, racism, and sexism. Three publications, more accurately described as "radical" or "left" than Marxist, though all print explicitly Marxist material, are developing new critiques of film. *Cinéaste*, with a general stand against "academic" film criticism—i.e., against the French and Godard—has tended to emphasize documentary and Third World

films. *Women and Film* has now ceased publication, but began with a strong feminist critique of the image of women in male Hollywood films, and then increasingly concentrated on commercial and independent—particularly feminist—women filmmakers. *Jump Cut*'s orientation has been towards an ideological critique of Hollywood and an interest in international developments in film theory, both semiology and Marxism.

Marxist film criticism occupies a peculiar, and we think crucial, place in the present development of the Marxist critique of culture. Because of the self-evident poverty of orthodox bourgeois film criticism, and the relative neglect of film by traditional Marxist aesthetics, at the present moment Marxist film criticism offers the possibility of transcending the former and advancing the latter. Marxist critics may emphasize or concentrate on one area of the total film process—the film itself as an object of study in a context; the makers and making; the audience's understanding of film; production and distribution; mediations on the preceding such as technical components, mode of presentation, criticism, the historical situation out of which the film object emerges and in which it is received; and above all the relation of the whole process to society, both in an historical context and with a view to change—but their work is among the most exciting and creative being done in Marxist cultural and aesthetic studies. An art form and medium unknown to Marx and Engels, film shares in the current reestablishment of a mature Marxist aesthetic and inherently goes beyond that into the deeper questions of Marxist social and political theory and practice.

Afterward: 2014

Looking back, 37 years later, it's worth remarking that this essay appeared on the cusp of a new wave of intellectual publication with the appearance of *Camera Obscura*, *CinéAction*, *CinéTracts*, *Tabloid*, *New German Critique*, *Frameworks*, *Social Text*, and other new publications, and a push for more conventional journals to account for radical political analysis. In some ways our unabashed willingness to speak as Marxists in *Jump Cut* separated us from people who for reasons of career-building or closet clinging wouldn't utter the M word, but tried to go with coded euphemisms such as "historical materialism." In any case there was a springtime flush of fresh and innovative work. And the inevitable pushback as political scaredy-cats matched their theory to the wind blowing through the Reagan and Thatcher years by suddenly fretting about "grand narratives" and how it was just not right to try to have a long-take overview of society but it was time to stay by the hearth and embroider post-structural formalisms.

But the fuller story of Marxism and film analysis would take much more space than we have here. Obviously the end of the Mao era and the Soviet state system changed the game again as Marxism could be used as a form of analysis that turned out to be particularly adept at understanding global neoliberalism. As the translation and rediscovery of a rich history of radical political cultural analysis and creative work proceeded in the 1980s, 90s, and Millennium, a fuller and more diverse cultural Marxism could be imagined. Within progressive media studies the formerly hostile branches of critical

cultural analysis and economic and institutional critique were increasingly able to co-exist and even merge in the best new work.

In the subsequent years we saw Marxism as a central concern in our own projects, creative and critical, but one that was endlessly renewed and enriched by the social practice and political activism around labor, community, race, sex, gender, and nation. In our vision, *Jump Cut* has been a place to invite a diverse set of voices, to stimulate an ongoing conversation to building an effective alternative.

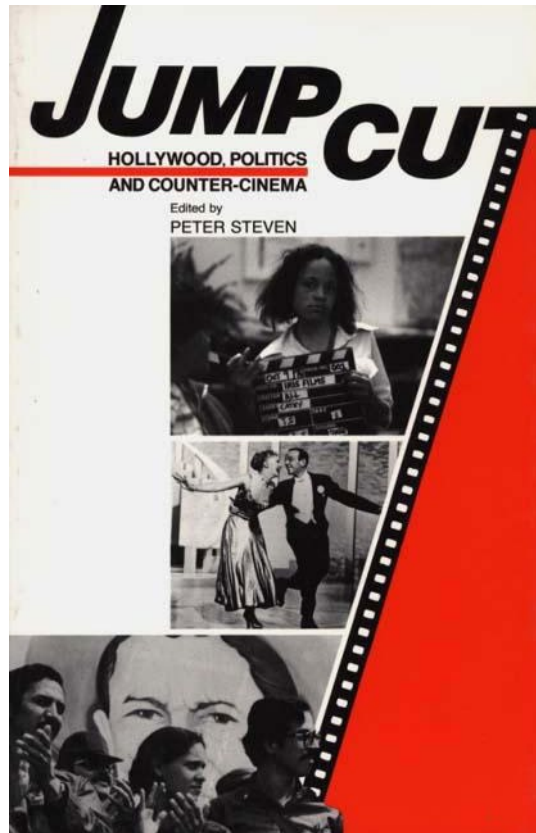
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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Hollywood and counter-cinema: the roots of *Jump Cut* (1985)

by [Peter Steven](#)

Jump Cut. The Book.

In 1985 I had the pleasure of editing an anthology of articles selected from *Jump Cut*'s first ten years. The book included a short introduction which sketched out my thoughts on the magazine's origins, its strengths, and its contribution to film education.[1] [[open notes in new window](#)]

The anthology brought together what I felt were some of the strongest articles from the magazine, covering many topics and countless films. Even at that point in *Jump Cut*'s history I was struck by the enormous amount of material. It was certainly a difficult task to select only a few pieces from such wealth. To reflect that, the cover featured children from Chicago, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, and women in Nicaragua—film stills from *In the Best Interests of the Children*, directed by Elizabeth Stevens, Astaire and Rogers in *Barkleys of Broadway*, by Charles Waters, and *Women in Arms*, by Victoria Schultz.

Now, thirty years later that array of strong writing from countless international film scholars represents a significant achievement for the magazine and its three founding editors.

There's no easy way to sum up the changes in the world of Film Studies since then. No way that I could easily 'update' my introduction. I'm buoyed by a quote from Thomas King's new book, *The Inconvenient Indian*, which he dubs a "chronical" because, he says, "history is like herding porcupines with your elbows." [2]

Perhaps, however, a few elements stand out a little clearer about the magazine's ongoing value. From the first issue *Jump Cut* has performed a delicate balancing act (a dancing dialectic if you prefer) between independence and commitment. *Independence* from the state, from institutions, from advertisers, and from the dominant film industry, yet paired with a *commitment* to the social and political movements working to change society.

Specifically, here's what we can find over the forty years:

- A non-sectarian left/feminist/queer political stance
- Commitment around the selection of subject matter – choices, that is not determined by whims or prevailing taste
- Principled engagement with alternative, independent, and movement

media makers

- Principled criticism of the anti-art biases of many social and political movements (particularly true in the 1970s though still lingering today)
- Consistent support for a political avant-garde over the merely fashionable and the new technology utopians so prominent in our times

Another long-time editor, Victor Navasky of *The Nation*, writes in his memoir *A Matter of Opinion* that his main task was to “dispel the myths about small magazines of opinion...” That their circulations are “too small to be significant,” that “they preach only to the converted,” that they are “perpetually on the brink of bankruptcy,” that “their shrillness limits their audience, that they lack credibility because they take ideologically driven positions.”[3]

This act of dispelling should be applied to *Jump Cut* as well. To me, the magazine’s longevity and success go a long way to disprove those myths.

Jump Cut stands for the commitment to the original goals of left-wing film studies. In other words, popular education for the 99% (what we used to call the “masses.”)

And what’s so important about popular film education from a left perspective?

Because commentators, and reviewers, industry touts, and the fashion industry—on-and-on, tell us every day of the week how to interpret what we see, pushing their ideologies, their values and goals.

Because the public, not merely graduate film students, are keenly interested in knowing more.

Because all of us are drowning in the cultural values of the dominant media. We need the tools for coping with this deluge, just as much as in the 1970s heyday of media literacy.

Notes

(2014)

1. The book was certainly helped to a healthy life by its striking cover conceived by my father, Arthur Steven, a celebrated book designer. [[return to text](#)]
2. Thomas King, *The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America* (Toronto: Random House, 2012).
3. Victor Navasky, *A Matter of Opinion* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005).

Hollywood and counter-cinema: the roots of *Jump Cut* (1985)

Jump Cut: Hollywood, Politics and Counter Cinema, edited Peter Steven, Toronto: Between the Lines Press, 1985. 400 pages.

"JESUS Elegant \$71,000

Seattle Oct. 3, 1979.

The rains have arrived, sparking first run grosses. Also providing a lift this week are some snappy newcomers. JESUS, Warner's religioso release, is pacing the B.O. race with a great \$56,000 at four Seattle hardtops. "— *Variety*

Variety magazine and its rave reports of "box office magic" represent the voice of dominant cinema. It's a voice magnified many times over: Hollywood, Wall Street, *People* and the vast machinery of other mainstream U.S. media have the money and the clout to cast it into every nook and cranny of North America and around most of the planet.

But at the same time there are other, different voices — different languages — calling for radically new types of films, and for a new approach to cinema. These voices don't have the backing of Wall Street and Madison Avenue but they are present nevertheless and very active in parallel nooks and crannies in North America and beyond, and especially in the Third World. Some of those voices can be found in this book.

Hollywood talks about product. The writers here talk about specific audiences and how certain films produce a particular blend of art and ideology. They call for a political criticism of the cinema.

Of course, this analysis doesn't come out of thin air. It represents the logical parallel and catalyst for a number of cinema movements that have emerged worldwide to challenge Hollywood and the dominant media. Over the last 15 years radical Third World filmmakers, the women's movement, gays and lesbians, and the independent left in North America have produced four strong alternatives to the mainstream cinema. In fact, these four movements of film activity stand for more than an alternative. Because all four embody political movements that challenge the dominant society, and because many of the key films consciously challenge conventions of style and approach in dominant cinema, they are often referred to as counter-cinema.

Political films are most often associated with the great European directors such as Jean-Luc Godard, Bernardo Bertolucci, Andrzej Wajda and Margarethe von Trotta. I have no wish to dispute this orientation. Works as diverse as Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) and Godard's *Tout Va Bien* (1971) will continue to influence the European political scene and world cinema. But we need to extend the political-film category and recognize that movements of radical filmmaking are flourishing in other parts of the world. This book concentrates on three areas—North America, Africa and Latin America.

Independent political filmmakers in North America are less well known and generally work on a much more modest scale than their European counterparts. Sometimes they have been completely ignored or misrepresented by the critical establishment. But I would insist that their work is no less important. Stylistically it is inventive; politically it is rooted in the major conflicts of our era; and above all it has found devoted and growing audiences. In scale of operation, Third World cinema lies somewhere between North America and Europe. The new African and Cuban cinemas especially have found large audiences in their home countries and some of the filmmakers work with substantial budgets. They are as a result often better known than most North American independents, yet they receive little of the critical or industry support

accorded the Europeans.

A few major films from these counter-cinemas are widely known: for example, the documentaries of U.S. filmmaker Emile de Antonio, such as *In the Year of the Pig* on Vietnam (1968) and *Millhouse* (1971) on Richard Nixon; Barbara Kopple's *Harlan County, U.S.A.* (1975); the feature films of Senegal's Ousmane Sembene; or Diego de la Texera's *El Salvador: The People Will Win* (1981). But these works also form part of much broader movements of filmmakers and audiences. The films coming out of these movements tend to lack funding, adequate distribution, and a mass audience (in Hollywood terms). But the connections of this counter-cinema to a social and political base plus the conviction and inventiveness of many of the filmmakers guarantee a continued growth in the years ahead.

There is a wealth of such films and filmmakers: from the innovative Film and Photo League in the United States of the Depression era; to the feminist cinema of Chantal Akerman and Michelle Citron in the 1980s; the comic avant-garde of Jan Oxenbergh; or the documentary work of Joris Ivens in revolutionary Cuba and the grassroots video in the new Nicaragua. This body of filmmaking and the political movements represented have provided a subversive counterpoint to the work and experience of the dominant cinema.

The magazine *Jump Cut* not only emerged as part of the course of these counter-cinemas, but also helped to shape their direction and analysis. At the same time it offered an important new political and social critique of the dominant cinema, a critique that benefited greatly from its juxtaposition—or integration—with the traditions and practices of radical filmmaking and politics. *Jump Cut's* style and approach found their source and inspiration in both the political activity of the New Left of the 1960s and selected older views on film and culture developed by the Old Left of the 1930s and 1940s. At the same time—and just as importantly—these political roots were supplemented by the specific evolving practice of filmmakers aligned with those movements. That practice, in conjunction with the politics, led to the left counter-cinema that continues to thrive today.

The roots of *Jump Cut*: the New Left

Jump Cut's low-budget appearance, tabloid format and plain graphic style exemplify its New Left origins. Cartoon and irreverent humor, usually directed towards more solemn film publications, maintain the counter-cultural style and feel associated with the underground press of the 1960s. But the magazine's New Left roots run deeper than that.

Jump Cut prides itself on being absolutely independent of political parties and institutions. The magazine receives only minimal advertising revenue. But its financial independence does not imply a purely subjective agenda lacking connections to other movements and groups in society. Rather, *Jump Cut* sees itself as accountable to a whole range of independent left and women's groups and activities. Unlike the 1930s, when most progressive politics in the United States centered on the Communist Party, the industrial unions, and the New Deal, political debate and activity since the 1960s have revolved around specific coalitions: a diverse set of complexities and contradictions often referred to as The Movement. The contrasting political notions of independence and accountability established within this movement have set up a dynamic tension for *Jump*

Cut's politics and aesthetics. This tension provides a unifying force for the magazine's editorials, and a context — though often unrecognized — for much of the critical writing.

As an offshoot of the U.S. New Left, *Jump Cut* remains strongly critical of academia. During a period filled with campus revolts over the Vietnam War, the New Left directed a vigorous attack against the entire educational system, especially the lack of contact between university learning and the serious issues facing U.S. society. Students and radical academics began to question the traditional division of disciplines, and the disregard for women's and Third World history, for African American, Latino, Native and Asian American cultures. In addition to this, film and media studies in general presented new problems that did not fit tidily within the conventional boundaries of academia.

Therefore, *Jump Cut* continually attempts to widen the kinds of discourse appropriate to serious film criticism. The articles in this book on film-use for political activists (Julia Lesage on Central American films), on the experience of various audiences (Claire Whitaker on lesbian viewers), and on film teaching (Michelle Citron and Ellen Seiter) all attest to this goal of pushing film study into a broader context than usual for academics.

There is a difference, however, between anti-academic and anti-intellectual. An anti-intellectual stance often rejects attempts to theorize from everyday or popular experience. The ideology of populism supports that stance and considers popular culture naively, as a true reflection of popular tastes and ideals. In *Jump Cut* a healthy disdain for populism runs through most of the writing, a disdain directed especially at the "popular cultism" so readily available in film magazines. It is a form of populism found not just in the "fanzines."

In the early issues *Jump Cut* made a point of taking Hollywood seriously, including a limited acceptance of genre studies and auteur theory (see in particular John Hess's two-part critique of French auteurism in Nos. 1 and 2, 1974). A number of articles dissected the cycle of Youth Culture Films fashionable at the end of the 1960s. This made sense to the editors and followed from their background in the New Left and its interest in popular culture. The editorial in *Jump Cut* No. 2 outlined the editors' basic approach to Hollywood:

"A true radical criticism must understand the role of entertainment in society and recognize uncomplicated amusement as a worthy human activity.

We are especially wary of two fallacies frequently held by radical intellectuals interested in film. The first is to see Hollywood films as the most direct type of indoctrination: a kind of propaganda for the status quo which is mindlessly swallowed by the mass audience. This is not only wrong, it is elitist, for it implies that the critic by virtue of his or her radical and/or intellectual nature is insulated from the effects of commercial films, while common people are totally naive in their viewing. The second fallacy—an inverse of the first—assumes that films are unimportant because "politics" is more important than "culture" (as if the two could be readily separated in practice), or because films are just distractions. But clearly Hollywood films are a significant part of bourgeois ideological hegemony. And as such they influence the

consciousness with which objective conditions are perceived."

It seems appropriate then to begin this book with a study of Hollywood, because *Jump Cut*'s first two years were characterized by attempts to grapple with that bastion of culture and ideology: the dominant cinema.

From the first issue *Jump Cut* also took up feminism, the politics of racism, and the role of liberation movements in the Third World. This clearly represented a shift away from the Old Left's hopes for revolution based largely on the working class. *Jump Cut*'s more broadly defined sense of politics has, if anything, become more pronounced in subsequent issues. The exchange between Chuck Kleinhans and Tom Waugh on gay male politics in Part Four shows this development and provides an example of self-criticism and the conscious evolution of the magazine. Where the Old Left's cultural criticism might have subsumed most political issues into class dynamics, *Jump Cut* argues for healthy diversity within the left.

As part of the New Left, *Jump Cut* has criticized the Communist Party U.S.A., not so much for its position on the Soviet Union, but rather for the narrowness of its cultural theory and the secretive tactics of the party in the Popular Front Days. Thus many articles and editorial comments stress the need for a more open politics. For example, the essay by Linda Gordon on *Union Maids* in Part Two criticizes the film for accepting the timidity of the Old Left and suppressing the CP background of the three women organizers who star in the film. In addition, the editorial in *Jump Cut* No. 2, quoted above, makes it clear that one of the magazine's main aims has been to argue for the political nature of culture. The Chinese Cultural Revolution exerted a strong influence here, and on the rejection by most *Jump Cut* writers of the orthodox base-superstructure model of Marxism as rigidly applied in most Soviet aesthetics.

Yet *Jump Cut* as a New Left project was certainly not cut off from the political and cultural debates of the 1930s and 1940s. There are deep roots here as well. As editor John Hess puts it,

"The search for a bridge was very conscious. We felt that the dismissal and ignorance of the Old Left by the New Left was a mistake."

The roots of *Jump Cut*: the Old Left

Jump Cut retains many elements of the Old Left's cultural criticism. Nearly all its writers adhere to a class analysis of U.S. society, despite differences in emphasis about class boundaries and the potential of various class fractions. Of course, the concept of social class means different things to different writers. The leap from simply recognizing class to analyzing cultural institutions and the role of artists in class terms involves a more precise theoretical and empirical understanding. Nevertheless, for nearly all the essays in this book, the basis for studying texts and audiences rests on categories of social class.

An important distinction can be made here between social-democratic and socialist analysis. Social democrats often recognize the existence of class divisions in society; socialists take this one step further and argue that class divisions also inevitably produce class conflict and struggle. The distinction between these two kinds of analysis seldom appears explicitly in the articles in this book, but the tension between the positions of class-in-itself

and class conflict often arises as the authors wrestle with questions of ideology, the role of progressive artists in Hollywood, and the tensions between nationalism and socialism in Third World cinema.

A specifically socialist approach to class and culture also emerges. The use of class analysis by the writers in this book often leads to a series of related questions. For instance, does the class outlook of artists visibly affect their work? How does the class nature of the film industry affect the content and style of particular films? Can contradictions in works of art be related to class contradictions? Do class differences among audiences affect the character and very existence of film genres? How do class differences among audiences determine the meanings of specific films, or the ways a film functions in society? The essay on working-class heroes by Chuck Kleinhans, in Part One, lays out an approach to many of these questions of social class and begins to weave a thread that runs throughout the rest of the book.

It is difficult to generalize about the traditions of Marxist aesthetics, but three groups of writers stand out. Clearly, Brecht, Lukács and Sartre tower above all others as major artists and theorists for the twentieth century. They make up one group that also includes many important iconoclasts, humanists, and Utopians, who have all found in Marxism a vital source for their creative and critical work. A second body of more orthodox writing, deriving from Soviet models, is elaborated in the film criticism of Harry Alan Potamkin, John Howard Lawson and Irwin Silber. These critics' analyses of popular cinema pay considerable attention to the specifics of the medium, and many of the questions they addressed remain important in the 1980s. Lawson in particular was astute in relating thematic trends in Hollywood to concurrent issues in the society at large. A third group, usually only party hacks, has had little interest in the specific qualities and emotions of art production. They merely apply generalized Marxist concepts onto the cinema with little regard for specific films and real audiences. To my mind *Jump Cut* writers have inherited both the legacy of the iconoclasts and some of the baggage of the orthodox.

Many writers within the Marxist tradition have emphasized the need to study particular works, usually making an attempt to trace connections and parallels between art production and society at large. Here there are essentially two areas of concentration: studies of great bourgeois artists (Marx on Balzac, Lenin on Tolstoy, Lukács on Scott); and studies of work in popular genres and traditions, such as folk music, the music hall and the early cinema (Brecht and Benjamin on working-class entertainments, Eisenstein on Chaplin and Griffith).

By and large *Jump Cut* writers have eschewed the high-art, great-artist orientation, in fact going some distance to debunk cherished icons — especially the “fathers” of the world cinema. Julia Lesage's essays on Jean Renoir's *La Règle du Jeu* and D.W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* (the latter included here) provide models for the reworking of great-artist studies within the sphere of Marxist-feminist criticism.

The traditional Marxist interest in popular working-class entertainments becomes greatly extended within *Jump Cut*, as part of a general post-war trend towards more comprehensive definitions of art itself. Many *Jump Cut* writers refer back to earlier questions posed by Marxists concerning popular art, and extend that analysis onto a broader terrain. John Howard Lawson would never have written about Shirley Temple, and so Charles Eckert's essay “Shirley Temple and the House of Rockefeller” reveals a

clear break with the past. Yet Eckert develops a number of issues well known to earlier radical critics. For example, he aims to trace connections (however complex) between Shirley's capacity for love and the ideological needs of the U.S. ruling class in the 1930s. In another vein, writers tracing the growths of Third World cinema point to ways in which filmmakers have used popular and traditional forms to create new works of decolonized art. The essays by Clyde Taylor and Julianne Burton emphasize the overwhelming power of cultural imperialism yet they also stress the forms of resistance embedded in much Third World popular culture.

The realism-naturalism debate—a series of questions that stretches back to the writings of Marx and Engels—remains alive in many of the essays in this volume. These debates over realism grapple with creative representations of the world, both in description and in tendentiousness: the class viewpoint. Classic Marxist aesthetics draws a distinction between two types of description. There is naturalism, a form of empiricism in art, which is satisfied to record, describe, or document observable phenomena; and there is realism, an approach that attempts to document structures and patterns not necessarily immediate or observable. Much of the film criticism in *Jump Cut* rests on this kind of distinction. For example, in her criticism of “Positive Images” in Part Three, Diane Waldman places that distinction between naturalism and realism at the heart of her argument.

However, for many of the writers here, a work of realism also goes beyond documentation to provide analysis from a clear social point of view. For some Marxists in the past, art with a social point of view led straight into the den of Socialist Realism; for others, then and now, realism need not correspond with any one set of formal approaches. Radical filmmakers themselves confounded easy definitions of realism, of what revealed and raised consciousness, of what worked and what didn't. So, one further set of roots should be examined in order to know the context in which *Jump Cut* originally appeared. It is a context that continues to nourish the magazine.

The roots of *Jump Cut*: a documentary and experimental renaissance

In the 1960s lightweight 16mm cameras and tape recorders became widely available, quickly followed by Super 8 in 1965 and portable video in 1968. These developments coincided with and stimulated the renewed interest in documentary films of all kinds, an interest that had been underway since the advent of cinema verité and direct cinema in the late 1950s. The combination of technological developments and the documentary renaissance crystallized in at least three movements of radical film practice in the early 1970s, which in turn formed the basis for the more fully developed counter-cinema later in the decade.

One movement emerged from the growing opposition to the Vietnam war and was fed by a critique of the way the dominant media handled not only the war but also the opposition itself. Thus the attempt to document and explain the anti-war movement was the immediate aim of the Newsreel documentary group formed just after the 1967 March on the Pentagon. As John Hess argues in his essay on U.S. radical film in Part Two, Newsreel was a catalyst for a rebirth in left filmmaking, which had been dormant since the 1940s. Many of the people involved in the late 1960s remain active today, building a counter-cinema that can trace a direct lineage to the early Newsreel group.

Second, the women's movement quickly grasped the value of documentary filmmaking—especially the observational style. In the late 1960s and early 1970s many feminist documentaries were produced—a form that especially encouraged the technique of drawing on the speech of women in the “real world.” Of course, women took up narrative and experimental work as well, as Ruby Rich points out in her article “In the Name of Feminist Film Criticism.” But these early documentaries were especially important, states Rich, because of the “validative” role they played in emphasizing the faces, relations, and speech of women previously ignored by Hollywood and the male avant-garde. By 1974, the year *Jump Cut* started, a solid base for left and feminist film and distribution had been established.

Finally, the 1960s saw a tremendous upsurge in documentary filmmaking in the Third World. In addition to the great anticolonial movements in Africa, Asia and Latin America, the introduction in the Third World of the new lightweight equipment encouraged filmmakers to document the cultures around them, celebrate their rich history, and communicate with others. These new forms of film practice have been a direct stimulus to the criticism and theory produced by *Jump Cut* writers.

In addition to documentary production, another very different connection was created from the incredible energy of experimental and avant-garde filmmakers. They stirred up new interest in questions of film aesthetics, radical form and content, sexuality, and visual literacy, questions that many *Jump Cut* writers have found provocative for political filmmaking and criticism. The relations between the demands of political criticism and experimental work have often been tense, but the influence of experimental cinema has perhaps played more of a role in the magazine than has been acknowledged. It's a subject for further discussion.

Counter-cinema of the independent left

In the 1980s, *Jump Cut's* areas of concern are somewhat broader than those associated with its origins and antecedents. Many issues of film theory, such as the meaning and applicability of semiology and psychoanalysis, are a source of continuing debate within the magazine, and at the same time the magazine has continued to explore the new openings in the political environment and radical film movements: the counter-cinemas.

Since the mid-1970s it has been possible to talk of a left counter-cinema: a cinema practice that looks to and identifies with political movements in society and has developed a conscious critique of the dominant media. Above all, the counter-cinema has produced a tremendous range of films. The essays in Part Two illustrate these achievements.

The film *Union Maids* (1977) provides the best-known example of the entire movement. *Union Maids* is certainly not a radical film in form, but in it Julia Reichert and Jim Klein created a structure and tone of oral history that proved to be an immensely fruitful model for many filmmakers. Also, the film continues to be widely distributed and often used explicitly as a work that challenges the dominant media through its socialist-feminist point of view and its emphasis on oral history rather than Voice of God narration.

Third World Newsreel stands as an equally important achievement. In an interview with Sherry Millner, Newsreel member Christine Choy, a major figure in left film since the early 1970s, raises many of the vital issues of left

counter-cinema. She speaks, for example, of funding problems, of the pressures for a slicker style, of racism in the media and on the left.

There has also been a feeling of renaissance in black cinema in the United States, yet the wide range of work being produced by African American filmmakers has not yet gained the critical attention it deserves. This is partly due to neglect and partly because the black cinema is generally not oriented to the same cultural sources as the white left. As Clyde Taylor argues, many filmmakers of color have preferred to work with fictional or mixed documentary forms, to a greater degree than white independent filmmakers. Because of these differences it remains difficult to generalize about left counter-cinema across the board—no one style dominates.

Part Two concludes with two pieces on the Quebec film *A Wives' Tale* (1980), certainly one of the strongest and most complex works of political cinema made in North America in the 1970s. Both the essay and the interview with the filmmakers stress the relationship that was built up between the filmmakers and the working-class women who were the subject of the film. The political background of the women's movement and close relations with the women in the film encouraged the filmmakers to examine the complexities of the union, the families, and the women's group with a sophistication that is rare in documentary filmmaking.

Yet despite the strength of these films and their widespread use in political and community organizing there has been little critical attention paid to their specific strategies as films. In contrast to the theory and criticism devoted to narrative fiction and experimental work, documentary criticism is underdeveloped. Also neglected is the whole question of film-use by various audiences: how political documentaries succeed or fail in arguing their case and engaging spectators.

The articles here point the way forward to this kind of critical work and suggest strategies for the future.

Women's counter-cinema

An emphasis on *Jump Cut's* left-wing character does not, however, do justice to the magazine's feminism. At the time of its formation *Jump Cut* was strongly influenced by the magazine *Women and Film*, produced in California. That publication was a source of ideas as well as a compatible project, and in fact some of the same people were involved in both journals. The demise of *Women and Film* in 1975 probably went unnoticed by most *Jump Cut* readers, but certainly galvanized *Jump Cut's* editors to pay more systematic attention to feminist criticism. Since then there has been a steady advance in feminist cinema debate: from women's responses to male-dominated film production to a film criticism based firmly on women's concerns.

The debate in feminist film has grown in scope as well, developing feminist theory around woman as spectator. Of course these developments aren't unique to *Jump Cut*. They've taken place against a background of the growing power of the women's movement. What is impressive, as the essays in this book show, is the range of serious work, including criticism arising from the experience and political struggles of lesbian artists and audiences. I think it is important to stress this range; discussion on a number of fronts has always been a goal for the women writing in *Jump Cut*. For example, in an article not published here, Sara Halprin argues

strongly for such a range of interests in her critique of a “dominant discourse” of feminist criticism. Halprin disputes histories of feminist criticism that set up an absolute progression from “sociological” approaches to “structural, semiotic, psychoanalytic theory.” (See “Writing in the Margins,” *Jump Cut* No. 29, 1984.) In this volume, Ruby Rich’s groundbreaking essay provides a model of openness to many different types of feminist cinema. It is a model of advocacy as well, urging feminists to study and to “name” women’s films in all their variety lest they be lost in the margins.

The essays in Part Three argue on a number of levels for the need to develop theory based both on women’s personal experience and on a wide political agenda. All the writers reject a simplistic sociology and emphasize the specificity of cinema as a practice and an institution. Yet they retain a commitment to take social contexts seriously, and this results in a continual widening of the areas of discourse appropriate to feminist criticism.

Many *Jump Cut* editorials have pushed to establish socialist-feminist criteria for all cinema practice—from North American avant-garde to Third World documentaries, from filmmaking to film viewing. In addition, the editors have sought the writing of women from different fields, not only those who have specialized in the film-theory jungle of academia. The writing in this book reflects those aims. The women’s movement and feminist theory have influenced the essays in all five parts.

Gay and lesbian counter-cinema

A new era of openly gay and lesbian politics and film began after New York’s Stonewall riots of 1969. By the mid-1970s many films from the perspective of the gay and lesbian liberation movements had been produced. In criticism too, an exciting process of rediscovery and re-evaluation of homosexual artists in Hollywood and the avant-garde was well under way.

Jump Cut No. 16, published in 1977, featured a Special Section on gay men and film. The collectively written editorial, which was the first treatment of gay cinema in the magazine, argued for the need to take up gay and lesbian criticism within the left:

“Active support for lesbian and gay male liberation emerges as a logical concomitant of the feminist struggle against patriarchy.”

But this process of the magazine “coming out” had not been without difficulties. In the introduction to the Special Section, editor Chuck Kleinhans summarized the history:

"While *Jump Cut* has already published the work of lesbian critics, submissions have been fairly rare—not surprisingly given the seemingly straight identification of the publication and given the left-wing political orientation of *Jump Cut* which doubtless further restricts possible contributions. ...

Few radical lesbians see writing film criticism for a magazine whose readers are mostly straights as a priority issue. ...

But, if it is difficult for straights of both sexes and particularly men to publicly take a position on sexual politics today, it is also

essential that one try to do so."

Two main themes emerge from these statements:

1. The lesbian and gay movements of the 1970s, including the issues connected to film and critical practice, stem from and remain closely connected to the women's movement.
2. The issues of lesbian and gay cinema must involve more than support for the civil rights of minorities. Filmmakers and critics must address the whole question of the patriarchy—an ideology and set of institutions that affect all sexual relations.

The cinema plays a crucial role in constantly recreating a sexist and anti-gay social fabric. In particular, two areas of daily life—sex-role stereotypes and a narrowly defined family ideology—are often learned and reinforced primarily through films and television. For these reasons, criticism of Hollywood and the construction of lesbian and gay counter-cinemas are of crucial importance to the entire left.

The authors of "Lesbians and Film," in Part Four, give specific reasons for their work:

"Creation of a lesbian film criticism is particularly urgent, given the intensified use of the lesbian as a negative sign in Hollywood movies and the continuing space assigned to lesbians as gratification of male fantasy in pornography and a distressing number of male avant-garde films....

There is the lesbian as villainess... the lesbian as vampire, both metaphorically... and quite literally... in the genre of lesbian vampire movies. There is the brutal bull dyke."

The article goes on to treat the major issues facing lesbian criticism and the goals of a counter-cinema, including the desire for, and problems with, positive images; the open representation of sexuality; the role of lesbian filmmakers within the avant-garde; the use of traditional versus experimental cinematic forms.

Third world counter-cinema

The articles collected here on Third World cinema represent another driving force behind *Jump Cut's* project as a whole, particularly in the 1980s. Since the 1979 Bard College Conference on U.S. Alternative Cinema, African American, Latino and Asian American filmmakers have become a stronger presence within the left media. Consequently, there is a growing knowledge of radical Third World filmmaking—films made in the Third World and those made by people of color in North America. Clyde Taylor, in his essay which opens Part Five, argues for the need to study Third World filmmaking for its own sake and also for what we in North America can learn from it.

Following Taylor's argument I have highlighted articles on the African and Cuban cinema. These chapters show the need to do more than simply appreciate the vitality of radical Third World filmmaking. They outline how Third World films often establish models for forms, content, relations with audiences, the nature of popular culture, and the political role of cinema. A film such as Sarah Gomez's *One Way Or Another*, discussed by Julianne

Burton, is more than a fascinating vignette of Cuban life. It provides a model for political filmmaking that engages its audience and could prove to be fruitful to filmmakers and critics here in North America. The Cuban cinema is also important since it goes right back to the early 1960s, and its dynamism and militancy have strongly influenced radicals in both Latin and North America.

Much of the new African cinema is at once political and formally innovative. This is quite clear in the incredibly rich films of Ousmane Sembene. In his article about Sembene's film *Xala*, Teshome Gabriel explains:

"If we accept the notion that artistic choice also connotes ideological choice, we must begin to investigate the ideological weight carried by a film's formal elements. Spectator involvement in *Xala* does not come, I would contend, from the plot and story structure alone but also from the execution of some basic cinematic elements such as editing, composition, camera positioning and movement."

The use of films in Europe and North America for Third World solidarity work dates from the 1930s with films such as Joris Ivens's *The Spanish Earth*, and reappears in the 1960s linked with the world-wide Vietnam solidarity. Tom Waugh's essay on Ivens shows the kind of cinema that can be achieved by progressive filmmakers working in co-operation with local people in the Third World. Ivens's representations of the underdeveloped and socialist countries are especially revealing when contrasted with those regularly presented by the dominant media.

This contrast is further developed by Julia Lesage in "For Our Urgent Use." She not only compares radical and mainstream films but also stresses differences between radical North American films and latino films from Central America. She argues,

"For example, what a North American film audience may interpret as an image connoting 'poverty' may signify 'a farm family's daily life' in its country of origin."

African American and Asian-American filmmakers find a natural solidarity with artists in Africa and Asia, and look to the Third World for political and cinematic models. Yet Third World cinema continues to be avoided in the generally racist atmosphere of academic film studies. The growing strength of counter-cinemas made by people of color in North America should spur the left to study and support Third World cinema here and abroad. I expect that writing on Third World film will play a greater role in *Jump Cut* in the years to come.

Why don't they like anything?

Some *Jump Cut* readers have complained that the magazine tends continually to present a negative response to films. This feeling on the part of readers may stem partly from the fact that *Jump Cut* sets itself up stylistically and semantically as non-elitist, youthful, non-academic, and in format like a tabloid. Many of the covers use familiar Hollywood faces. Readers assume that a tabloid format makes for light reading, preferably in bed. Thus some of them are surprised and disappointed when the articles turn out to be more demanding, politically and theoretically, than they

expect.

In fact, *Jump Cut*'s seemingly "hard line" towards Hollywood is usually balanced by a range of enthusiasms for independent North American and Third World cinemas. This is a tendency illustrated by Michelle Citron's appreciation for the work of Jan Oxenberg and Clyde Laylor's call to study Third World cinema in order to "rehumanize international film craft." As for Hollywood itself, on closer inspection even the hard line taken in some essays contains complexities of enjoyment, response, and identification. Julia Lesage's fascinating essay on *Broken Blossoms* and the vigorous debate about Shirley MacLaine, both included in Part Three, make explicit the many levels of critical response possible in approaching Hollywood fiction.

But there is also a legitimate criticism here that *Jump Cut* editors and writers need to recognize and address. In the past too many of the articles on Hollywood seemed like sour grapes. Too often the result was a grim trashing of genuinely popular films, while the explicit political criticism only served to disparage the enjoyment (innocent or not) that audiences found in the film. That sort of criticism makes readers feel ignorant or foolish, and in the end fails to provide the tools necessary for understanding texts and contexts.

At the same time *Jump Cut* demands a lot from its readers, and questions easy assumptions about what constitutes a "popular" film. The magazine does not cater solely to the tastes of cinephiles or film buffs: the kind of people who know everything about Westerns but nothing about Native Indians. There is another type of filmgoer: the people who may attend movies regularly but are continually frustrated, shocked, or bored by what they see. *Jump Cut* is more inclined to consider this other rather alienated audience than most film publications. This springs from a belief that there is a large potential audience that wants to look at film from a more critical, broad perspective, not simply that of the dominant cinema. This is not to say that all those who do attend Hollywood films have bought all the ideological goods. Because of these complexities, it remains for students of Hollywood to be precise with terms such as "mass audience" and "popular cinema."

From the beginning *Jump Cut* has been critical of the left's treatment of dominant cinema. In the early issues that criticism remained somewhat subdued. Ten years later (*Jump Cut* No. 28) editors Kleinhans and Hess delivered an explicit attack on left film orthodoxy, showing the similarities of left and bourgeois reviews of Warren Beatty's *Reds* (1981). For Hess and Kleinhans both kinds of reviewing offer only a personal response and fixed position on the film; neither kind of review offers the reader tools for understanding, nor do the reviews accept the possible diversity of response.

Obviously, criticism that offers tools for understanding remains an ideal, certainly not always achieved in *Jump Cut* or elsewhere. To my mind the articles in this book all stretch beyond personal response and fixed positions and help us understand Hollywood as a whole—preparing us for the next hot subgenre and wave of special effects just around the corner. The articles also highlight the radical alternatives of counter-cinema, now developing on many fronts.



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The Sons and Daughters of Los: culture and community in Los Angeles

by [David E. James](#)

Note: This was written in 2001 as the introduction to a collection of essays I edited, *The Sons and Daughters of Los: Culture and Community in L.A.* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003). Its title derived from William Blake's poem, *Jerusalem*:

*and Los drew them forth, compelling the harsh Spectre
Into the Furnaces & into the Valleys of the Anvils Death
And into the mountains of the Anvils & of the heavy Hammers
Till he should bring the Sons & Daughters of Jerusalem to be
The Sons and Daughters of Los*

The essays primarily, though not exclusively, concerned collective community-based cultural initiatives in the city deployed around, for example, poetry, woman's art making, gay performance, Mexican American printmaking, Asian American filmmaking, and African American video. My role in the project was an extrapolation from a history of avant-garde, amateur, working-class, and other minority cinemas in Los Angeles on which I was then at work (referred to in the first footnote): *The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). In this work, I attempted to demonstrate that, despite the identification of the city with the capitalist film industry that supplies commodity culture for the world's consumption, Los Angeles had an unrivalled history of grassroots popular film practices. Even though their mode of production was constructed in alterity to the industry, thematically, formally and in other ways, they were often engaged in various kinds of critical dialogue with industrial culture. That emphasis on popular cultural production rather than on the consumption of corporate culture placed my project in opposition to the dominant orientation of U.S. cultural studies, then in its moment of ascendancy.

In its origin in the UK, cultural studies had focused on post-war ritual and other symbolic forms of working-class opposition to the power of the dominant

capitalist (if also vestigially feudal) authoritarian state. But as it developed in the UK and especially as it was adopted in the US, cultural studies transmogrified into affirmative arguments for the putative empowering possibilities that moments of contradiction in those culture industries were supposed to allow. Following one of its signal sound-bites, “intellectuals” were accordingly chastised for having “no respect” for what was speciously proposed as “popular culture.” While not wishing to deny that popular consumption of commodity culture could indeed profitably fasten on its contradictions, in soliciting essays for *The Sons and Daughters of Los*, I hoped that we might identify forms of popular cultural practice in Los Angeles, which would be all the more important since they had been created in the heart of the culture industries, yet in communities that it had not yet totally colonized. It is unchanged from its previous publication.

The essays included were:

- Bill Mohr, “Peripheral Outlaws: Beyond Baroque and the Los Angeles Poetry Renaissance”;
- Laura Meyer, “The Los Angeles Woman’s Building and the Feminist Art Community (1973-1991)”;
- Eric Gordon, “Fortifying Community: African American History and Culture in Leimert Park”;
- Claudine Isé “Considering the Art World Alternatives: LACE and Community Formation in Los Angeles”;
- Sande Cohen, “Not History: Remarks on the Foundation for Art Resources (1977-98)”;
- Meiling Cheng, “Highways Performance Space: Communities-In - Transit”;
- Ji-won Ahn, “Signifying Nations: Cultural Institutions and the Korean Community in Los Angeles”;
- James Moran, “All Over the Map: A History of L. A. Freewaves”;
- “Self-Help Graphics: Tomás Benitez talks to Harry Gamboa Jr.”;
- Nithila Peter, “Unorthodox Mystics: Swans That Flock to Vedanta Society of Southern California”; and
- David E. James, “Popular Cinemas in Los Angeles: The Case of Visual Communications.”

David E. James, Los Angeles, 2014 ii 26.

Introduction

The Sons and Daughters of Los: Culture and Community in Los Angeles
by David E. James

In the initial stages of the project whose results are collected in the present volume, we approached popular culture in Los Angeles using as a heuristic the idea of “grassroots cultural organizations.” By this, we had in mind the more or less *ad hoc* instances where people who were marginal to the city’s

established cultural institutions came together to share their poetry, painting, dance and other forms of art, and in so doing created communities that then developed lives and momentums of their own.[1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] Conceived in dissatisfaction with both industrial and other publicly sanctioned forms of culture, they generally produced themselves as demotic alternatives to establishments that they perceived to be alienated and compromised. Within the frame of this guiding orientation, the associations we explored were diverse in respect to both their internal organization and their eventual relations with the dominant cultural institutions. Growing from the initial efforts of very small groups, in some cases only one or two people, they were originally independent and autonomous, at least to the degree to which these concepts can presently be meaningful. But as they developed wider constituencies, they inevitably became affiliated in various ways with the kind of organizations with which they had before been in conflict, both public—such as city, state and federal agencies—and private—such as foundations and corporations. Despite these affiliations, their creativity remained to some degree of refractory, still honed on a stone of critical alterity.[2]

With the exception of the Vedanta Center (an earlier and somewhat differently conceived initiative), the associations we examined were formed in the tide of populist social contestations mobilized in the 1960s. And mostly they were shaped by the ideas in which social and political identity were conceptualized and lived in this period, that is, through struggles for civil rights by ethnic and sexual minorities. The local emergence and self-assertion of these political identity-groups were of course part of national movements, and indeed the remarkable ethnic diversity and other demographic features of Los Angeles ensured that they were also often affected by global issues, especially by population shifts and changing patterns of migration. On the other hand, the more immediate motive in their creation was usually an interest in a particular cultural form, often a medium with a distinctive and integral relationship to the development of the specific social group. For example, though African Americans in the city have made public art in the form of murals for many years, the combination of indigenous and European elements in the traditions of mural painting developed in post-revolutionary Mexico became a primary reference-point in the assertion of a Mexican American identity in Los Angeles. Even if they were locally forged and if they were not quite so thoroughly constitutive, similar relations have obtained between other groups and specific mediums. Performance art, for example, has proven particularly valuable for women and gays and lesbians, and so the current flier distributed by a performance collective that is the subject of the one of the essays below announces:

“This workshop is for gay men to gather together and create community through performance.”[3]

Sometimes a given medium and the institution that developed around it proved valuable for different groups at different times; thus, when the poetry center Beyond Baroque became a focus for minority poets, part of its constituency changed from what it had been in preceding periods when it revolved around beat and punk subcultures. And though most of the

associations studied here based themselves on mediums with less rather than more concurrent commercial viability, sometimes these and certainly parallel communities have flourished by employing the art forms of the culture industry itself—film, television and recorded music. Visual Communications (V.C.), an Asian American community cinema considered below is such an instance. Like all attempts to create popular practices of commercial cultural forms, these last have to construct themselves both within and against the immense social authority and economic resources of the industrial usage of the mediums in question, and so V.C. and similar popular cinemas have been especially precarious, though by the same token their achievements remain of special interest.

But whatever the relative importance of their immediate aesthetic or social motivations, the organizations examined in this volume all have in common a foundation in integral human usefulness, the non-instrumental exercise of the creative faculties. All were created by people, some of them oppressed or otherwise marginalized and disenfranchised, who found cultural activity to be a means of self- and communal discovery and realization. All were sustained as popular activities in which people developed forms of symbolic self-expression and joined with others of similar interests. Within the communities they formed, art was not engaged as primarily the production of commodities, and so its role in increasing the value of invested capital or in preserving the system of capitalism as such was negligible. Even though their existence has been besieged and importuned by a rampant market economy, they have known from the beginning what William Blake, as he lived through the emergence of the commodification and industrialization of culture in the late eighteenth century, came at last to understand:

“Where any view of Money exists Art cannot be carried on, but War only.”[4]

Nor were their practices initially supported by the institutions of the established museum and conservatory cultures, for since their interests were no more purely aesthetic than they were purely social, they could not be coerced into the defensive, putatively extra-social reservations premised on aesthetic autonomy. Initially they were opposed to both to the sublation of popular participatory culture into *haut bourgeois*, fetishized real estate and to the entertainment industries’ commercialization of it into standardized, marketable commodities. Their point of origin and their ongoing aspiration was thus popular activity prior to both poles of the contemporary “high/ low” bifurcation of cultural possibilities, prior to both forms of reification by which social creativity is assimilated into complementary fractions of capital.

Sailing without regard to the Scylla and the Charybdis of the high/ low binary, popular cultural activity finds itself and its constituencies outside both arms of corporate culture—the industry and the museum—and as a consequence has hardly developed a theoretical armature of any general social leverage or persuasiveness. A full theoretical elaboration of such a contrary model of contemporary popular culture cannot be attempted here, and any assessment of the implications of the communities (anti-capitalist? proto-socialist?) it might subtend must remain provisional. On the one hand, the complexities of

both crucial terms—“culture” and “community”—bespeak the huge social transformations of the period of advanced capital.[5] A comprehensive encounter between the two terms would have to include the way they have been constructed in the fields of sociology, social and cultural anthropology, urban geography and the various minority studies areas, as well as in the specific disciplines of poetry, art history, performance art, video, and the other artistic mediums.

On the other hand, the available data about actual community cultural projects is extremely limited, and indeed the present project should be understood as a contribution to the collection of primary material upon which more generalized hypotheses about new forms of progressive popular culture could be elaborated. So though specific theoretical presuppositions are implicit and sometimes explicit in each of the essays below, the alternative theories of popular cultural production they project are subordinate to the historical details, the aesthetic achievements, and the varying social possibilities of the individual case studies. Any attempt to deduce or synthesize a general theory of a genuinely popular culture from them would necessarily involve a critique of the institutions and the theoretical apparatus that presently legitimize and naturalize capitalist culture as a whole. In lieu of such a general theory and propaedeutic to it, here we will only sketch the environment in which the sodalities studied below came into being, the cultural conditions in the city in which they were created, and hence give some concrete grounding for their various innovations and interventions.

Such a geographical focus on Los Angeles may well initially appear to be Quixotic, if not misguided. For the city is famous for being the center of industrial culture—the capital of the culture of capital—and, at least until recent developments in museums and art schools reversed this, hostile to autonomous art. But what has appeared to be the city’s categorical anomalousness is in fact a compounded prototypicality that gives the present project a more than regional significance. For if the specific urban and spatial structures developed in Los Angeles are, as many claim, the model for future cities, and if the culture industries located in it have a global hegemony, then the conditions that variously shape, inhibit, but also nurture the emergence of truly popular cultural communities in Los Angeles may reasonably be considered to exemplify a general situation; the specific institutions and histories examined below have implications about alternatives to capitalist culture more generally. Here, then, we will be concerned with a pattern of homologies and other relations between social space and culture in a city whose drastic reconfiguration of both appears to be historically prototypical.

Whether despising Los Angeles or celebrating it, whether understanding it (as they used to) as an exception or (as they now do) as a paradigm for future conurbations all over the world, geographers have recognized it as a distinctly new kind of metropolis. The great nineteenth century cities, they argue, were each comprised of a vertically expanding core surrounded by dependent rings, but Los Angeles developed as an agglomeration of separate communities, dispersed across the desert plains between the San Gabriel Mountains and the Pacific Ocean. There, successive waves of immigration—Spanish invaders in the colonial period, then Anglos and other Europeans from the mid-west and

south, Blacks and Mexicans, and most recently, Asians—created distinct enclaves, many of them internally homogenous and largely segregated from each other. Together these formed, not the radial melting pot of the modern city, but a polynucleated postmodern megalopolis.

In the phrase of Robert M. Fogelson, one of its pioneering historians, the Los Angeles that became a great city, did so as “a fragmented metropolis.”[6] Its fragmentation only intensified over the last third of the twentieth century when it became ethnically and culturally one of the most diverse cities in the nation. Changes in the U.S. immigration laws in the mid-1960s combined with the city’s expanded role as a center for Pacific Rim capital and with the Reagan administration’s neo-imperialist ventures in Meso-America that made it the premier port of entry for immigrants simultaneously transformed the city’s demographic structure. But fragmentation had characterized its development from the beginnings, and awareness that phased immigration, voracious peripheral growth, and horizontal rather than vertical development was producing an unprecedented galaxy of unintegrated satellites is itself anything but new.

Postmodern geography now proposes a "Sixty-Mile Circle" of "at least 132 incorporated cities" or "the most differentiated of all cities," "a combination of enclaves with high identity, and multiclaves with mixed identity...perhaps the most heterogeneous city in the world." [7] But before World War II, well before Los Angeles became so conspicuously a microcosm of global diaspora, the 1939 WPA guide to California described it as "nineteen suburbs in search of a city"—already a tripling of the "six suburbs in search of a city" noted in 1920s witticisms.[8] And, summarizing in the midst of the urban expansion, for the rubric to his 1946 chapter on the “Los Angeles Archipelago” of “social and ethnic islands, economically interrelated but culturally disparate”—still the best analysis of the historical evolution of the city—Carey McWilliams quoted one Charles A. Stoddard who in 1894 had noticed,

“Southern California is made up of groups who often live in isolated communities, continuing their own customs, language, and religious habits and associations.”[9]

Reinforced by the long history of anti-labor politics that hindered trans-ethnic working-class consciousness and solidarity, the social dispersal that allowed immigrant groups to settle in relatively homogeneous, relatively autonomous clusters produced a distinctive segregation. Though historically, these communities all too commonly become visible to the hegemony at moments of racial or cultural strife—the anti-Chinese riots of the 1870s, for example, or the military’s terrorization of zoot-suiters in the 1940s, and the uprisings of Blacks in the 1960s and Latinos in the 1990s—all the while, within themselves they have nurtured and sustained local traditions of enormous and distinctive vitality. The barrios of East Los Angeles, for example, or the neighborhoods of South Central where African Americans have preserved the customs of the rural south and even echoes of Africa, and more recently the "little" Asian cities of Tokyo, Manila, Taipei, Saigon, and so on have all lived as vibrant and substantially self-sustained cultural milieus. Re-establishing some of the elements that formed the land- and cityscapes of other spatialities—the family

structures, the customs and the festivals, but also the creative rhythms of street behavior and social living—these communities have fashioned themselves between the cultural patterns of their originals and those of their new environment, forging a new local life for often globally-distant identities. [10]

Spatiality in Los Angeles is then structured between two primary vectors: a centripetal pull towards Hollywood/downtown core, which has always been and remains the focus of the civic, economic, and transport networks of the basin, and the centrifugal pull generated by the semi-autonomous industrial and residential enclaves. If the segregated peripherality of these enclaves precluded their full integration and representation in the city and full participation in its rewards, it also compensated by allowing a spontaneous culture to flourish and to mediate in some measure the social traumas that pervade the postmodern city—for which again Los Angeles is recognized as the prototype.

For the global movement of capital that impelled many of the population flows that created the city has also devastated its social fabric. In the past quarter-century, massive if selective de-industrialization and the growth of precarious, low-income jobs especially in the service and tourist industries, have been compounded by white collar crime, virulent police corruption and brutality, and the exploitation and destruction of the land, water and air. Trickling down to the lives of working class people, these socio-economic developments manifest themselves in un- and underemployment, poverty, homelessness and alienation, in crises in public health, housing and education, and in suspicion and conflict among sexualities and ethnicities. With the world-historical victory of neo-liberalism, similar and in some case much worse forms of intertwined social destabilization, atomization, and massification have become globally pandemic; but the paucity of attempts to address them in Los Angeles have been no less extreme than the economic developments that produced them. Paralyzed by what has been called “a collective or civic aversion to dealing with social, economic and political problems,” local governance has not begun adequately to address the erosion of the older forms of urban community, and instead

“governments and populace have colluded in a decline of the commonwealth...the collapse of community.”[11]

In this, again, the city is a paradigm of the widespread lived experience of loneliness, alienation and social impotence, of the cultural attenuation and anomie that are now more intense and inescapable than even during the upheavals and dislocations of high modernity. Then at least, however corrupted its actual instantiations may have been, socialism as a political philosophy sustained the ideal of a non-exploitative human commonality, whether projected as popular participatory control over local life or as a future classless society. But now it is the market, abetted wherever possible by military power, that administers the world, and free-market fundamentalism appears locally, not in communal social projects, but as *privatization*. In the telling image of one popular analyst, we now go “bowling alone” for, as a more abstract one reminds us, the

“gravest and most painful testimony of the modern world, the one that possibly involves all other testimonies to which this epoch must answer is the testimony of the dissolution, the dislocation, or the conflagration of community.”[12]

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Though this crisis in community is a cultural crisis in all senses, it has been enacted especially dramatically in the industrialization of older forms of culture, and in their transformation into the business of entertainment during their assimilation by and integration into first finance and then corporate capital. Summarily designated as “Hollywood,” the corporate entertainment industry now comprises virtually all forms of film, television and recorded music, and all their various satellites, spin-offs, franchises, and surrogates, their pimps and proxies. These industries have now extended to the spheres of politics, sport, religion and other distinct areas of public life, reconstructing them within its own values and priorities, commodifying what once were popular activities and turning them too into entertainment. The traditions that inform the culture of popular participation may be implicitly or residually present in industrial culture, but only as they too are also reduced to entertainment.

The resulting divided culture, the culture of separated monopolized industrial production and of popular consumption, is the culture with which Los Angeles has become globally synonymous, and locally it is so overwhelmingly powerful that the forms of popular cultural practices in the city that are the present concern have become virtually invisible. For Hollywood’s ubiquitous and all-pervasive presence in Los Angeles makes its attractions and rewards the context for all popular cultural activity. So great is the gravitational pull of the industry’s stars and its star-system that all other arts are forced to revolve around it. The structural core-periphery tensions that shape the city geographically and economically thus generate parallel determinations within its culture: the minority arts of the local communities in Los Angeles are created in the tension between the centrifugal pull of independent and indigenous aspirations and the centripetal pull of corporate capitalist culture. In Los Angeles culture and geography are reciprocal: the social tensions of cultural marginality are isomorphic with the city’s spatiality.

Until the 1950s “Hollywood” designated simply the companies that manufactured films and recouped their expenses and profit in theatrical ticket sales. But since then their production has simultaneously diversified and also consolidated what before were several separate industries while, especially with television, distribution sites have metastasized throughout the range of once-public places running from homes and schools to prisons and hospitals. The limits of the film text itself have eroded and fused into all its marketing extensions; sequels, t-shirts, theme-parks, lunch pails, toys, comic books, video games, the miasma of hype that makes it hard to imagine, let alone glimpse any space outside the business.

This apotheosized culture-as-capital is identified with Los Angeles more

completely than an art form was ever before associated with a single place. Infants together in the first decade of the century when the movies were little more than a cottage industry, the city and the industry fostered each other's growth to maturity. Late in 1907, the Selig company built a stage on Olive Street for the shooting of *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and two years later, the company established a permanent base in the city. Other companies followed, including a troupe of Biograph players to shoot the local epic *Ramona*, and the Keystone Comedy Company, and by 1912, over seventy production companies in Los Angeles employed three thousand people.

During the teens the manifest advantages of the region's year-round sunshine and topographical variety persuaded even more companies to relocate to the region, and eventually some of them merged into larger combines that joined film production and distribution—the vertical integration of the industry. By mid-decade the industry's annual payroll had reached \$20 million, and the identification of Hollywood the medium and Hollywood the city was established, with sixty percent of U.S. films being produced there.[13] [[open endnotes in new page](#)] In the postwar years the studios surpassed the French, Italian and British film industries to become single most important source of production, and by the 1930s the U.S. film industry was dominant throughout the world. Even Carey McWilliams's unusual rhetorical excess does not seem an inappropriate summary of the city's debt to the medium:

“If ever an industry played the Fairy Prince to an impoverished Cinderella, it has been the motion-picture industry in relation to Los Angeles”[14]

After World War II and Hollywood's second major global expansion, the other branches of the entertainment industries were assimilated to it. Though the rise of television coincided with a series of crises in the 1950s that forced the industry to restructure, in the early 1970s it again re-invented itself. Generating subsidiary industries as well as accelerating the development of other labor-intensive craft industries in the area, Hollywood attracted all the other components of the broadcasting industry. Since then, the television industry has itself expanded enormously and the two industries are now completely integrated, not only with each other, but also with the popular music industry, whose move west became conclusive in the 1980s. The strength of the industry's infrastructure and the abundance of creative and technical workers in the area supported the economic explosion of the 1990s, lifting Southern California out of the slump caused by cut backs in the defense industries. With the expanded need for product to fill the new multi-channelled global television systems of the decade, by the turn of the century the annual business of the entertainment industries based in Los Angeles had grown to \$40 billion, with more people in Los Angeles working in Hollywood than in electronics and aerospace combined.

The concentration of control over these media industries by a small number of corporations increased rapidly during the 1990s, representing the centralization of control of over the industry's production parallel to the longer-standing globalization of the market. Japanese corporations began to invest heavily in the industry in the late 1980s, with Sony buying Columbia

Pictures in 1989 for \$3.4 billion, and Matsushita buying MCA (Universal) in 1990 for nearly \$7 billion.[15] Though film production had been controlled by a handful of major studios since the 1930s, by the late 1990s the six largest of them accounted for 90% of theatrical revenue, and all but sixteen of the 148 features Hollywood released in 1997 were produced by only six firms. By that time, six firms also effectively monopolized more than 80% of the country's cable television, and only four companies controlled one-third of all radio station income. [16]

Especially after the deregulation of the communications industries in the 1996 Telecommunications Act, the elimination of restrictions on corporations moving across different branches of the communications industries led to enormous increases in conglomeratization. Just to take one, locally important example, the Walt Disney Company, with annual revenues of *only* \$25.4 billion (by comparison, General Electric, owner of NBC grossed \$129.9 billion in 2001): among Disney's movie holdings are Walt Disney Pictures, Touchstone Pictures, Hollywood Pictures, and Miramax Film Corporation; it owns the ABC television network, together with the Disney Channel, Soap Net, all divisions of ESPN, and 80% of A & E and the History and Biography Channels; in addition to Disneyland itself, its theme park holdings include Disney World, Disney Cruise Line, and Disneylands in Paris, Tokyo and one planned for Hong Kong; and as well as extensive holdings in book publishing, it owns half of the magazines, *U. S. Weekly*, *Discover* and *ESPN*, fifty radio stations, 741 Disney stores, and extensive theatrical interest.[17] This list is just a selection, and diversification of an equivalent or greater extensiveness has been documented for AT & T, Sony, AOL/ Time Warner, Vivendi Universal, Viacom and one or two more of the integrated communications and entertainment cartels.

Some indication of the momentum of this consolidated corporate ownership of American culture is revealed in the periodic summaries by one of its most important analysts, Ben Bagdikian. When he published the first edition of his book *The Media Monopoly* in 1983, fifty corporations dominated mass media in the United States; by the second edition in 1987, the fifty companies had shrunk to twenty-nine. By 1997 that number had been further reduced to ten and by 2000 he found that only six dominant firms controlled more of the industry than the combined fifty seventeen years earlier.[18]

Manufacturing the culture that is marketed and consumed all over the world, the Los Angeles entertainment industry has become the vehicle, not so much of an American imperialism as the imperialism of capital itself, inflating into a global omnipotence the implications of the Supreme Court's 1915 diagnosis that

"The exhibition of moving pictures is a business, pure and simple, originated and conducted for profit, like any other spectacles." [19]

Just one instance of this voraciousness may suffice, the case of *Jurassic Park*: the film *Jurassic Park* was not only "accompanied by over 1,000 products identified as official Jurassic Park merchandise, distributed by 100 official Jurassic Park manufacturers around the world," but the Jurassic Park logo from the merchandising was displayed *in the film itself* in the park's gift shop;

thus, the “film itself was a tie-in,” intradiegetically displaying its combined merchandising, product placement and other forms of economic proliferation. [20]

Though cultural activity has always been subject to economic transactions, only in the recent past have the culture industries themselves become so thoroughly integrated with each other, with all other forms of material production, and with the state. Training the world in consumerism, entertainment becomes capital’s mode of operation. As, writing in Los Angeles, Theodor Adorno noted half a century ago, corporate culture has amalgamated with advertising.[21] Or, as a Coca-Cola marketing chief more recently remarked, it is the medium in which capital operates:

“The culture that comes out of L.A.—films, television, recorded music, concerts—is the popular culture of the world and it is through that culture that we communicate with the consumers of Coke.”[22]

Guy Debord and others among the Situationists, the French philosophers who provided the most profound analysis of the assimilation of human life into this cultural-economic system, designated it as the *Spectacle*. In the “Society of the Spectacle,” the immediate relationships among people appear to have been replaced by relations between people and images, an imaginary relationship that also has the effect of concealing the actual social relations created by the capitalist system’s production of material wealth. The symbol and fulcrum of this condition, Los Angeles is thus the Capital of the Spectacle, and the comprehensive form of the city’s economic, spatial, social and cultural alienations is ontological:

“The spectator feels at home nowhere, for the spectacle is everywhere.”[23]

Though the ruin of community, the alienation of the imagination and authentic social relations that constitutes the Spectacle, now affects almost everyone in the world, it affects people in Los Angeles especially powerfully and comprehensively. At once a cynosure and an *ignis fatuus*, and alternately enriching and depleting all other arts in the city, Hollywood attempts to frame all cultural practice in Los Angeles in its own economic imperatives and entrepreneurial ambitions; life here is enthralled by it.

To designate as “popular culture,” not Hollywood itself but practices outside and opposed to it contravenes what has become the term’s dominant usage, its reference to the consumer culture produced by capitalist industries. This recent transformation and narrowing of the concept of popular culture is not accidental, but rather has accompanied parallel transformations and narrowings in the cultural field as a whole. Commodity culture’s colonization of all areas of life—the individual psyche, the public realm, the political process, and indeed all forms of art—now appears to be so complete that, it is often argued, any popular practice outside it is impossible, if not inconceivable. And responding to the preoccupation of the cultural field by capital, many journalists and academics have made corresponding investments. Whereas early attempts to legitimate the study of what was then

called “mass culture” approached it as sociological or ethnographical data, more recent methodologies employ aesthetic criteria that allow for newly positive understandings of its social role.

So though the fact of the structural integration of the dominant forms of contemporary culture in the general operations of capital is indisputable, its implications are widely disputed. More or less determinist positions like those of Adorno and the Situationists mentioned above, for example, that are rooted in Hegelian analyses of capitalism’s intrinsic alienation and so propose that cultural domination and exploitation follow necessarily from the economic structure of the entertainment industries, have become key points of reference, usually negative ones, in contemporary debates over the social implications of the mass consumption of culture produced by corporate interests.

On the one hand, it is argued that corporate culture, especially broadcast television, has been pivotal in the disintegration of the democratic process, the collapse of community, the rise of the New Right, and the emergence of a universal cynicism.[24] But as with all other forms of capitalist production, the culture industries’ need constantly to reconstruct themselves produces disjunctions and contradictions that render the overall system unstable and vulnerable to intervention by the people involved in its various stages. So on the other hand, other commentators emphasize the possibilities that the industrial production of entertainment does not preclude authorial self-expression during the process of its manufacture, nor does mass consumption of it preclude the audiences’ parallel assertion of their own identity and creativity, specifically their ability to mobilize their own critical, against-the-grain reception of its intended messages.

When such creative responses to entertainment become socially extensive, they produce fan cultures that may elaborate the imaginary identifications we all make with others who share our tastes into virtual or even real communities that become to various degrees independent of the original mass media sources; the Grateful Dead and Star Trek fan cultures are among those most often cited as sustaining such communities. Indeed an entire academic discipline now exists, premised on the moments of autonomy and alterity that the system as a whole allows, and so on the supposition that resistance to capitalist culture is marshaled within its own processes: Cultural Studies.

Though the Cultural Studies literature is now so immense that every position on the question of the relation between culture and political economy in these industries can somewhere be found in it, its main tradition derived from the work of the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the 1970s and 1980. The Birmingham group formulated itself initially around the investigation of the more or less delinquent activity of specifically working-class subcultures: dress, hair-styles, dance-movements and so on—the traditional field of anthropology or sociology rather than the aesthetic per se. It proposed that these subcultures reflected the transformed class tensions of advanced capitalist society and were, at least partially, ritually symbolic continuations of earlier and more overtly political working-class social contestations. In this formulation, popular culture was understood to

comprise "Resistance Through Rituals,"[25] that is, specifically working-class opposition to the dominant culture, which in Britain at that time was still the culture of the bourgeois and the aristocratic establishment, not yet melted into air by the entertainment industry.

The primacy of this working-class resistance to the dominant culture was largely lost in the Americanization and "postmodernization" of the Birmingham project that produced contemporary Cultural Studies. Occurring during the Reagan/ Thatcher era's assaults on trade unions and all other forms of working-class self-organization, the transformation of the discipline entailed parallel offensives. The term "popular culture" was decisively relocated from working-class oppositional subcultures to the entertainment industry, which in the United States (and increasingly so in Britain and the rest of the world) had itself become the dominant culture. Its exclusive reference became the consumer culture manufactured by corporate industries rather than street-level attempts to resist or transform it, let alone to sustain alternatives to it.

Popular culture was now produced by corporate capital, not by the people. As the term acquired the market definition of popular, its specific associations with the working class and hence the possibility that culture could focus structural social resistance were dumped. In a period where the significant crises in capitalism were explained as crises in over-production, to be assuaged by increasing the consumption of commodities of all and every kind, the academic study of culture followed suit by deploying itself primarily around the consumption of commodity culture.[26] The academy became yet another stage where capitalist culture as a whole was legitimated and naturalized; affirming rather than interrogating the status quo, Cultural Studies amalgamated with advertising.

Though the present work does not assume that any autonomous sphere of popular culture, whether specified as the activity of an ethnic or sexual minority or as some fraction of the working class understood more generally, may now exist outside the gravitational field of the culture industries, it is oriented to those popular practices that attempt to produce themselves outside the priorities and process of the culture of capital, and so outside the field that Cultural Studies now demarks. Though they are surrounded by and inevitably linked to Hollywood, the initiatives considered in this book are displaced from it in multiple ways, but especially in being pursued as essentially amateur practices, and almost all in mediums that the entertainment industry has not occupied. Hollywood and Los Angeles, the industry and the city, culture and geography form the context, comprise the cloth on the edges of which participatory popular cultures weave new forms of community.

In this they mark the continuation of the cultural resistance that began when the arts were first industrialized in the print business of eighteenth century England. William Blake earned a meager living for himself and his wife on the edges of this industry, but he devoted himself to the composition of epic poems that he illustrated and engraved himself, the two of them coloring the printed sheets by hand. In these poems, Blake detailed a mythology

describing the emergence of the modern world system—the specters of science, imperialism, the industrial revolution, and commodity culture—but also envisioning revolutionary republican attempts to humanize it. He coined the name Los for his central figure, an anagram for “Sol,” the sun, that also punned on the *loss* that surrounded him. Blake imagined Los as a blacksmith, hammering out a vision of a fully-human, fully-emancipated commonality. In the furnaces of his imagination, Los labored to build Jerusalem, or Liberty, by producing a genuinely popular culture, a Republican Art, such as could be made at home like Blake’s own, or one owned and exhibited by the general public, like early Renaissance frescoes—or modern murals.

Some two hundred years later, the word Los became current among working-class Latinos, many of them displaced from their homelands by the global forces of capital and empire, as the name for the city to which they had fled, a city where they hoped to find liberty and fellowship and which they sometimes illuminated with exquisite, spontaneous frescoes.[27] From one of the first to one of the most recent instances of crucial cultural resistance, the Sons and Daughters of Los continue to contend in their furnaces.

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A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes

1. My own role and investment in this project followed from previous work in the study of popular culture, particularly independent cinema, and in the study of Los Angeles. The introduction below draws on several of my previous publications, especially *Power Misses: Essays Across (Un)Popular Culture* (London: Verso Books, 1996), and a history of non-studio filmmaking in Los Angeles currently in process, parts of the introduction to which are adapted below. Agreement with the principles expressed in this introduction should not be ascribed to the other contributors. [[return to page 1](#)]

2. Constrained by both space and hindered by the difficulties of finding scholars willing to commit their time to topics of this kind, our survey is by no means exhaustive in its account of either cultural communities that have existed in the recent past, or are presently coming into being. Prominent among the omissions are the Woman's Building, the Wallenboyd and the Boyd Street Theaters, the Los Angeles Center for Photographic Studies, various public television initiatives, and Pasadena NewTown. New organizations, the many forms of community that are growing around the Internet (the Los Angeles Alternative Media Network, for example), are beyond the scope of the present volume, as are organizations specifically responsive to very recent immigration, such as the Mayan organization, IXIM, and the Salvadoran American National Association. On these last see Nora Hamilton and Norma Stoltz Chinchilla, *Seeking Community in a Global City: Guatemalans and Salvadorans in Los Angeles* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), pp. 66-67. Our concerns here include attention only to those grassroots community movements that developed specifically around cultural activities; for the role of parks, neighborhood and homeowners associations, community newspapers, public libraries, and the like in creating communities in Los Angeles, see *Metamorphosis Project White Paper Number One, The Challenge of Belonging in the 21st Century: The Case of Los Angeles* (The Annenberg School for Communication, 2001, <http://www.metamorph.org/vault>).

Another major omission here is attention to the many communities that have formed around music. These include classical music, ranging from the "Evenings on the Roof" of the 1940s and the "Monday Evening Concerts" (for which see Dorothy Crawford, *Evenings On and Off the Roof: Pioneering Concerts in Los Angeles, 1939-1971* [Berkeley, University of California Press, 1995]), to the music and sound events organized by Cindy Bernard, initially in the late 1990s at the Sacred Grounds coffeehouse in San Pedro and then at the MAK Center for Art and Architecture at the Schindler House in West

Hollywood. And they include more popular practices of music, of which the Los Angeles punk movement in the 1980s and the South Central rap movement in the 1990s are the most important recent examples. These latter were not examined here because mostly (though not entirely) they developed in nightclubs, record labels or informal tape distribution mechanism that grew on the edges of or within the music industry itself.

3. “Highways Spring 2002 Schedule,” notice for “Gay Men’s Performance Workshop.”

4. “The Laocoön,” *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed., David V. Erdman (Garden City: Doubleday, 1982), p. 272.

5. For user-friendly introductions to these concepts, see respectively Raymond Williams, *Culture* (London: Fontana, 1989) and Anthony P. Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (New York: Tavistock Publications, 1985).

6. See Robert M. Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis: Los Angeles, 1850-1930*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

7. Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London; Verso, 1989), p. 224; and Charles Jenks, *Heteropolis* (London; Academy Editions, 1993), pp. 17 and 32.

8. Kevin Starr, *Material Dreams: Southern California Through the 1920s* (New York; Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 84); and the *WPA Guide to California*. (New York: Pantheon Books, [1939]1984), p. 208.

9. McWilliams, *Southern California: An Island on the Land* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, [1946] 1973), p. 314.

10. The notion of “cultural bifocality” or pluralism is now more germane than older assimilationist models of acculturation; see Hamilton and Chinchilla, *Seeking Community in a Global City*, p. 9.

11. Greg Hise, Michael J. Dear, and H. Eric Schockman, “Rethinking Los Angeles,” Greg Hise, Michael J. Dear, and H. Eric Schockman, *Rethinking Los Angeles* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1996), p. 11.

12. Respectively Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis; University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p.1.

13. David Bordwell, et al. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York; Columbia University Press, 1985). p. 123. By 1922, 84 percent of US films were made there. [[return to page 2](#)]

14. *Southern California*, p. 341.

15. Five years later, Matsushita sold 80 cent of MCA to Seagrams for \$5.7 million. These figures are taken from Colin Hoskins, Stuart McFadyen, and

Adam Finn, *Global Television and Film: An Introduction to the Economics of the Business* (Oxford; Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 23. For a complete analysis of the effect of the corporatization of the media system, see Robert W. McChesney, *Rich Media: Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times* (Chicago; University of Illinois Press, 1999).

16. Figures in this paragraph are from McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy*, pp. 17-18.

17. Selected from listings in "The Big Ten," *The Nation*, 274, 1 (7 January 2002), pp. 27-32.

18. Ben H. Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly*, Sixth Edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), p. xxi.

19. Mutual Film Corporation v. Ohio Industrial Commission. See Richard Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915-1928* (Berkeley, University of Californian Press, 1994), p. 199.

20. Janet Wasko, *Hollywood in the Information Age* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), p. 205.

21. See Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York; Herder and Herder, 1972), p. 161:

"So completely is [culture] subject to the law of exchange that is no longer exchanged; it is so blindly consumed in use that it can no longer be used. Therefore it amalgamates with advertising."

22. quoted in Andrew Jaffe, "The Hollywood Threat to Madison Avenue," *Los Angeles Times*, 11 September 1991, B7. The article reported that Coca-Cola Co. had retained Michael Ovitz and his Creative Artists Agency to "put it in touch with 'global pop culture.'"

23. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995), p. 23.

24. Some recent examples of such wholesale critiques include Pierre Bourdieu, *On Television*, trans., Priscilla Ferguson (New York: New Press, 1998), and Jeffrey Scheuer, *The Sound Bite Society: Television and the American Mind* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1999). Robert D. Putnam has argued that television watching is negatively correlated with civic participation and social involvement:

"Television...is bad for both individualized and collective civic engagement, but it is particularly toxic for activities that we do together. ...[J]ust as television privatizes our leisure time, it also privatizes our civic activity, dampening our interactions with one another even more than it dampens individual political activities" (*Bowling Alone*, p. 229).

On the other hand, some recent empirical evidence from Los Angeles is

equivocal about the negative effects of television, finding that whereas it had a direct negative effect on the relatively privileged Westside of the city, it had “indirect positive effects” among the largely immigrant populations of East Los Angeles; see *Metamorphosis Project White Paper Number One*, p. 34.

25. See Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, eds., *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-war Britain* (Birmingham: Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1976).

26. As Nicholas Garnham has noted, the emphasis in affirmative Cultural Studies on cultural consumption rather than production “has played politically into the hands of a right whose ideological assault has been structured in large part around an effort to persuade people to construct themselves as consumers in opposition to producers”; see “Political Economy and Cultural Studies: Reconciliation or Divorce,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 12, 1 (1995), p. 65

27. On the urban writing of working-class Latinos in Los Angeles, see Susan A. Phillips, *Wallbanging: Graffiti and Gangs in L.A.* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1999). The city is designated as “Los” on a map on page 151. As part of California Trilogy, James Benning made a wonderful film in 2001 about Los Angeles that prominently featured its Latino citizens; he titled it *Los*.

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In Plain English—images of students at the University of Oregon, accompanied by their words. Their names were not given till the end of the tape.



I was salutatorian of my class but when I went to my counselor, he told me I should think of applying to community college. He thought a university would be too challenging for me.



My mom and dad used to tell me, "You're a GI baby." .. For a long time I was really proud of that.

Perpetual subversion

by Julia Lesage

The following essay is an expanded version of a plenary lecture I gave at the conference, Quiet Revolution: Politically Subversive Cinema, sponsored by the graduate students in the Film Department at San Francisco State University, October, 2014. Since many of the students at SF State are engaged in both media criticism and production, a background similar to my own, my remarks are especially addressed to those who know this pleasure of combining theory and craft.

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Phenomenologist Martin Heidegger argues that humans do not just have being [*Sein*] but being-there or being-in-some-place [*Dasein*]. He says we are thrown into a world not of our choosing at birth and have to learn how to navigate in it. This makes the encounter with physical and social conditions, learning about them, and shaping them while not usually controlling them a part of every human life. The “da” of *Dasein*, the there-ness, means we gain our identity from social relations, participating in social groupings all differently placed in relation to history, institutions, money, ideology, class—the large-scale structures that Marxists study and political activists seek to change.

Existentially, as individual people we relate to each other through mediated representations, including ongoing communication through language and narrative, and we each do so in unique ways. We inherit a structured physical/cultural world. As Louis Althusser would say, we are “interpellated” or incorporated from birth into state and social institutions. But we also make something of the world into which we are born. Each generation re-creates, partially innovatively, partially conservatively, the social conditions that structure their lives—and different groups understand very differently the need, often urgent, to do this.

What I would like to focus on here is an approach to art that contrasts with my usual writing about film, which often analyzes particular films in relation to social structure. In this case, I’d like to start from a contrasting place, to emphasize artists’ interest in people’s unique ways of acting and feeling in the world, and to look especially at the practice of the filmmaker as “located” in a socially specific way. For me, it is also an occasion to reflect on my own past documentary videomaking practice.

Romantic aesthetics

Even though I understand its limitations, I have long been drawn to a vision of artistic practice that has its origins in the 19th century Romantic



I'd rather be called Klamath or Payute, but you don't know that from meeting me. Other native people could tell.



When your family has been here for four generations, you feel pretty American.



Even when I tell them I'm Guatemalan, they think Guatemala is Mexico.

Movement in Europe, the idea of art as creation and expression. Even today, the Romantic aesthetic legacy persists. For example, in any contemporary arts college or film school, you will find many young people, like 19th century bohemians, drawn to the arts with a vision of themselves as outsiders rebelling against stifling bourgeois respectability. From the 19th century to the present, in terms of the narrative arts, a broad cultural assumption persists that we need artists to dip into their deepest selves and articulate or give form to emotion and also to previously unexpressed, perhaps inexpressible perceptions. For the artist, this means expressing and shaping both what was previously hidden from oneself and what's been unnoticed or taken for granted in society, including what may have been repressed or suppressed. Such an act of exploration and expression includes articulating the darker aspects of human action and the complexity and ambivalence of human consciousness.

In my graduate study I was introduced to a useful exposition of the Romantic aesthetic, articulated in 1938 by philosopher R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art*.[\[open reference page in new window\]](#) According to Collingwood, art's raw material encompasses feelings, emotions, impressions, and experiences raised to level of consciousness. In most people, an ordinary aesthetic sensibility moves from sensuous to imaginative and conscious levels, and each higher level of articulation reorganizes the original sensory, now memorial, experience through thoughtful reflection. Artists use this aesthetic capacity in a more self-conscious and elaborate process. They learn craft skills within an artistic tradition, usually from teachers, and use that skill, in their artistic technique, to express the particulars of their experience and imagination in their own unique way. For artists, creating something entails a process of discovery—finding out the dimensions of an emotion, perception, or event. Although artists usually start from a certain insight or problematic, the very act of working on the art piece leads to further insights and refinements, and so the process of artistic creation advances without a precise preconception of where it will end. Artistic creation is not only a self-conscious articulation of aesthetic insights, it is also intended as an act of communication. Audiences often have a sensuous or emotional reaction or gain some new awareness upon experiencing some work of art; their response has been shaped by the artist's consciousness that has organized the material for them. (Clearly some people don't "get" a work of art while other people do, but even then there is no single or obvious fit between artistic conception and audience response).

The value of such a Romantic aesthetic can be seen when we understand the necessity for a perpetually subversive art. Restatements of the particularities and nuances of historical existence will always be needed since people constantly experience the flattening out and reduction of meaning attendant upon representation. In our efforts at communication, we create and experience a certain degree of miscommunication. Language, the putting into words, reduces the multifarious aspects of anything spoken or written about, and no one understands all the dimensions of what someone else tells them. The artist will always have the task of naming, of drawing attention to previously unrecognized or misrecognized realities. It is a process that has to go on over and over, and particularly from one generation to the next, and from those out of power to and about those in control.



We are U.S. citizens except we don't have the power to vote.



Because I'm the color that I am, I looked very "natural" there. Everyone assumed that I was Kuwaiti or Palestinian.



I myself am not yellow.

Discourse

The *Dasein* that Heidegger postulates also implies that each generation is born into power relations that inflect all the material conditions of existence. For example, in our own times the social institutions at the center of power have control over what is ordinarily communicated and how broadly things are communicated. Such institutions include science, economics, law, politics, government, education, religion, the medical profession, the business world, and media institutions. As Bill Nichols puts it, such institutions express relatively uncontested truths backed up by law; these Nichols calls the discourses of sobriety.

By *discourse*, I mean a whole complex structure of representation with multiple forms of expression that work together to provide *a way of seeing the world*; usually that discourse is conveyed through language, but it could be nonverbal, as in many sciences, and it could be visual and verbal as with the mass media. Family imposes a discourse, and Art is also a discourse. According to Nichols, the discourses of sobriety have instrumental power and are socially delegated to alter or control the world. Through discourse/s things are made to happen. In particular, the discourses of sobriety "regard their relation to the real as direct, immediate and transparent,"(4) and people usually take their presuppositions for granted. Now I think we understand what kind of people govern at the centers of power—what class, what race, and what gender. What we may not attend to is the way that any discourse leaves something unsaid, unspeakable.

I mentioned before that language is a filter on the world, but having the language to define the world also enables us to change things. As Nichols indicates, ordinarily the discourses of sobriety abrogate to themselves the rights of definition over things and persons and social process. They presume to decide what the truth is, who may tell it, and what things are worthy of notice and discussion. Thus, to depict things in film and to allow ordinary people to name their experience and their world is to assert what is in ever new and fresh ways. And another strategy of resistant art is always needed, that is, to say to these controlling institutions and their ways of defining the world, "the Emperor has no clothes."

In Plain English

To take a specific example, for many college students and professors, the students' lived experience as well as the structure and ideology of higher education goes unanalyzed. But that may be less so for students of color, whose experience and history are often left out of the curriculum, or relegated to specific classes such as Asian American or African American literature and not taken into consideration elsewhere in their studies. In my own video work, I found that making a film with underrepresented groups on campus is a very effective way to counter that neglect. Consider here these words from a tape I made with students of color at the University of Oregon, [In Plain English](#). Eric Ward analyzes his role at the university from a perspective that's often ignored:

"Tokenism is like being at this university because they want us here; they get federal funding if we're here. It makes the university diverse and they learn a hell of a lot from us. I mean they get a lot from us, much more than they give back because



In each of our families, there's someone very blonde and blue-eyed and there's someone very dark.



If you're black, you're black.



Because I'm the color that I am, people don't think twice that I'm not going to agree with what they are saying ... and so they say it.

we end up having to teach them a lot. And it costs us. What happens though is that they want us here but they don't really want us to say anything, at least don't say anything that's going to force them to stretch to do something."

I would like to describe the process of making *In Plain English*, since I think making film/video from and about your own environment is one of the most satisfying ways to make subversive media. I made this video at my own university, and later another, with students with disabilities, called *Getting Around*. Both are in the University of Oregon library and have had a lot of classroom use. If you are interested in making resistant media, you will find that many groups in struggle want a "video about their group," and it was on that level that the ethnic student unions first approved of this project's existence and goals. The student leaders had developed their own cogent analyses of the educational system, which were articulated in the tape; and each of the student unions consequently used the tape and promoted it after it was completed. Even more important, a staff person who had worked years organizing anti-discrimination workshops also wanted to make such a tape with students of color. Dianna Kale, a Native American academic staff person in the Office of Multicultural Affairs, joined me in making the tape. Kale's ongoing work with students of color meant that her analysis informed the interview process. Her familiarity with the student as individuals meant they felt comfortable talking about a whole range of issues with her that they might not have discussed in the same intimate way with me.

In Plain English is a talking heads tape. Visually, I framed the students as authorities, as intellectuals who've thought a lot about the university structure, and I placed a primacy on their voices. They were given the chance to prepare what they wanted to say and how they wanted to dress. They and I saw their performance in this tape as a public event. In their verbal style, the students are authoritative and articulate. They are what Antonio Gramsci would call organic intellectuals or what we might call more colloquially "grassroots" intellectuals. In their families or among students of color on campus circulate meanings and ways of articulating historical reality that are excluded from dominant discourse. As they speak with insights gained from their multiple "locations," the students in the tape provide alternative cognitive maps with which to interpret something which might have been thought about in a more reductive way— "the college experience."

In terms of editing style, I do not reveal either the students' names or ethnicity until the end of the tape. I edit segments from various interviews related to a given theme up against each other, so that the argument or perhaps contrapuntal voices flow into each other as a whole. Often students disagree or do not have similar experiences. Sometimes their experiences are related to skin color, sometimes to gender (for example, the darker skinned men are harassed by police; the fairer-skinned women of color are treated as exotic). However, with a unified voice, the students denounce Eurocentrism in the curriculum and the expectations they face to represent their race.

In terms of the visual style, we see is a rapid procession of faces, of a variety of ethnicities and colors. Inside what each student narrates about their life are numerous contradictions or frictions against social expectations. Here are a few examples. One man who looks very Anglo discusses Latino issues as a Latino. A Black woman says because she looks "normal," she thinks it is important to be out as lesbian. A Chicana says people mistake her for



I look "normal," whatever that means, and so that's why I feel it's really important to be out.



When my grandmother was very young, she was sent to a boarding school in Riverside, California, and she was beaten for speaking her language.



My parents very much speak Navaho and they don't let us forget it either.

Italian. Color is interrogated both by the students in the tape and by the viewer. The use of close ups and a neutral background reduces connotation. Because of the primacy of the verbal argument, the voice-face relation invites fantasy. We are confronted with what we guess about the students and what they tell us about themselves. And when the end credits come up, we are confronted again with some of our previous projections, especially about race, mixed race background, immigrants, and color. Although the students' anecdotes are lively and imagistic, and the students seem cohesive "subjects" whose image invites projection, what they say presents a conflict of discourses. Their subjectivities navigate a world unacknowledged by hegemonic notions of "reality." They contest the structures of knowledge proposed in the classroom, the behavior of fellow students, and the reduction of their identity to issues of race.

In Plain English's production process was about as far from that of a "fly on the wall" documentary as you could get. To prepare, Kale and I talked to a number of students about their background and educational experiences. Some of them had directly expressed interest in the project, others were people whom teachers suggested to us, and even others Kale recruited. We taped audio interviews with each of these students and had the interviews transcribed. After we selected students for the final filming, we told each interviewee approximately what areas we would be asking them to discuss on video. Finally, after the editing, we transcribed the tape's sound track and invited participants to veto anything they said that they did not want to be in the final version.

Our goal in all this was to delegate as much authority as possible to the student participants. What I understand in retrospect is how much their participating in the video and its having a public presence in the university meant to each student. When we watch documentaries, or even when we make them, we often do not think much about what agreeing to appear in a documentary means to those in it. In fact, those filmed are committing to tell their experience and to perform their self in an act of public communication, and this has extended consequences for them. They become witnesses, with heightened self-consciousness and self-awareness as social actors.

Witnesses

I'd like to now move to a consideration of the broader implications of using witnesses in documentary film. For instance, filmmakers interested in social documentary often use characters or witnesses who have a foot in more than one social world. On film, those figures can then translate from one world to another. In fact, all of us participate in various discourse communities. We belong to overlapping social groups, each of which pursues certain goals or shares a common situation and has certain forms of expression—language, dress, characteristic actions—in common. We attend to each of our discourse communities with varying intensity at different moments of our life: we may be a college student, teacher or potential teacher, family member, salaried worker, perhaps a member of a religion or an ethnic group, perhaps a media maker. We all learned early about discourse, noticing as children the key differences between the worlds of adults and ourselves, often parodying or making fun of adult worries and admonitions. We learned further at school that identifiable groups are regulatory, normative, and disciplinary. If you do not meet the norms of a group you are in, you are criticized, isolated, and even shunned. For this reason filmmakers often focus on the advantages and limits of one



Because you have an accent, they don't let you enter to this society.



And then, after they took a polaroid picture of him, they asked if he ever thought about joining the Eugene Police Department.



It's funny because I never look at a white person and ask them to speak for their whole race nor

of the discourse communities or “worlds” we live in. We cannot live outside discourse, but as media makers we can utilize our specific social and material “locations” and that of our witnesses to give nuance and an authoritative tone to the film we want to make.

As someone who has worked in both film criticism and video production, in this case as a social documentarist, I am particularly interested in the power of the witness' first-person voice naming not only her history but, as placed in a documentary, the history of a group. What is fascinating about this voice, listened to from the ground up, is that it offers insights into how power works, speaks from a position of authority on the topic, and if used well in the film, it potentially contains all the quirkiness and contradictions that characterize each of us as human.

At the same time, I am also concerned about how in both the filming and editing stages, a documentarist narrows down a witness' voice to the goals of the film project at hand. Both in choosing whom to film and which footage to include in the final project, the filmmaker is using people as characters in a story or argument, as figures within a narrative trajectory. Each person who appears as a “figure” in the media was at the time of being filmed someone with a peculiarity and specificity of experience, someone shaped by multiple causes, linked to innumerable social relations, and complexly placed in history. For the filmmaker, those human figures, what they said, their visual presence—all these become reduced to material that the filmmaker shapes in a new act of communication.

To ameliorate this reductiveness, or at least to take responsibility for it, the documentarist may place him or herself as a figure within a film, either in a documentary or a self-reflexive film, which includes footage about the very process of representation. In both kinds of films, using the first-person voice as a witness inside an argument, or in an autobiography, the real-life person behind that speaker in film exceeds her representation. That is, this is a dynamic person with many facets, with an identity shifting across time, shaped by changing environments, and with memories that are also malleable across time. In addition, with shifts in both personal and social history, what witnesses will want to speak to publicly, out of social need, will also change over time.

I watch and appreciate many documentaries where witnesses' voices speak to an argument or where their presence is used to paint a kind of portrait, but I also understand that there is a sleight of hand here in representing people that characterizes the documentary genre as a mode of discourse. It is important to remember that another kind of subversive filmmaking may consist of going back and looking at what other things these people may have been up to or what else may have been going on in similar environments, aspects overlooked or ignored. Place, person, and moment exceed representation. In terms of people or places or historical events, there's always another story to be told. In relation to my own work, for example, a biracial student gave me a valuable critique of *In Plain English*; she said I filmed just student leaders and not ordinary students of color trying to get through college who were perhaps more content to fit in or lead their own lives and not get involved with social issues. She was right. There were other stories in these students' lives and they were not as focused on race.

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do I judge their whole race by them.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Locating people in their own lives

Getting Around—images of students with disability at the University of Oregon in their daily routines.



Dave Maloney and his assist dog.



Paul Triantafilo's family lived downwind from a nuclear test site.

Performance theory, exemplified in queer theory in the writings of Judith Butler, tells us that people are always in the process of producing their own selves. In film, a contrasting perspective is implied in the documentary tradition of cinema verité. And although I would critique that aspect of it, I still appreciate that documentary tradition for its depiction of the idiosyncratic milieux in which people live out their daily lives. Sometimes these documentaries have been made with a political intent, as with the films by Frederick Weisman; other times, they serve as portraits, often of eccentrics, such as in the work of the Maysels brothers. More generally, cinema verite falls within a larger literary and cinematic narrative tradition, naturalism, which sees environment as overwhelmingly shaping people's lives. Although I reject this political philosophy, the art deriving from it is still gripping because of its plethora of environmental detail.

For those of us who are social documentarists, we do well to enrich the depiction of our witnesses, especially showing how they create their lives day by day. We may need to incorporate more detail about the environments of the people we film, their roles, daily rituals, and regular interactions with others. We may also want to show how they or we misrecognize ourselves, misunderstand our own identity or social roles. We have many contradictory aspects to our lives, in our motives for filming and in what we choose to put in or leave out of a work. This can also be material "told" in a film.

It has long been a tradition in photography and film for the artist to select details from ordinary life and invest them with emotion and suggested meaning, both in terms of the material photographed and in terms of aesthetic choices such as framing, composition, and lighting. Objects and environments always have a story to tell about social relations, about what's unique and what's typical. For me, great viewing pleasure comes when a film/videomaker structures a vision of everyday spaces for me so that I can attend to urban and domestic locales in ever new ways, and I return to the such films to re-experience their expressive perspectives. I especially find this pleasure in the works of the lyrical avant-garde—for example, in works by Bruce Baillie, Leighton Pierce, Gunvor Nelson, and Midi Onodera.[\[open references in new window\]](#) The surprise in what they select to show and the style of their framing and editing make their art fresh although viewed many times.

Especially as interpreted by the visual artist, things and places give us a glimpse into social relations. The photographer and filmmaker's interest in the physical environment often derives from his/her interest in what social geographer Doreen Massey would call "geographies of power," that is, how in any given location people are differently placed in relation to larger social forces. A place, according to Massey, is constituted by a multiplicity of overlapping, reciprocal social relations and a meeting up of multiple stories. As a filmmaker I find that she offers a suggestive perspective on place that is useful in expanding our perspectives about what to look for and shoot when we go out in everyday environments to film.

Again, by necessity, photographed space is necessarily reductive—a quick slice



Ph.D. student Kathleen Capps (left) is severely vision and hearing impaired. She teaches English composition with a sign translator (left).

through time, selected and framed with the artist's singular intuition about what makes the image significant and impactful. This is what Roland Barthes calls a photograph's "punctum." At best, such representation invests locale with new meaning for the viewer, letting us see new relations within it, re-imagine the familiar, or think in fresh ways about how people enact their daily lives. In longer works, the filmmaker faces choices whether or not to rely on traditional (ideologically inflected) connotations in the mise-en-scene or to suggest whether a place might be the site of conflict, negotiation, and historical process. A social documentary might represent an environment that is the "turf" familiar to a social minority, who see and use it in a way that differs from dominant perspectives and use. This is the structuring tactic, for example, in Louis Hock's 1986 *The Mexican Tapes*, which is about his Mexican neighbors living in southern California—four families who lived in his housing complex and whom he films over a number of years. In the process, Hock's life and that of his wife, photographer Elizabeth Sisco, became intermeshed with that of these illegal immigrants from Mexico, particularly as the Mexican families face the ever-present threat of deportation by U.S. agents or "La Migra." By focusing on social relations over a length of several years in one circumscribed space, Hock also explores the meeting of two cultures and very different histories and class positions in that place.

Getting Around



Jacquelyn King has an invisible disability, epilepsy, that consists of seizures and many after effects. She is the assistant producer on *Getting Around*. Jacquelyn loves to cook for and entertain friends, especially from her Christian fellowship.

On a low budget, I made a tape with students with disabilities at the University of Oregon, [Getting Around](#), [click to see video] which also uses as a structuring element people within their everyday places. A group of undergraduates with various kinds of disabilities had seen *In Plain English* in a class on the "Americans with Disabilities Act," discussed it among themselves, and asked their teacher to find someone to make a tape with them. They were not organized in a campus "student union" as the students of color were, and their lives in general as university students required much time and effort to negotiate the processes of ordinary campus life. Thus, the making of the tape required me to follow them in the course of doing what they already had to do.

I did not see this lack of project planning as a disadvantage and instead envisioned as the tape's structure interviewing each person briefly about their disability and then running that soundtrack alongside images of the interviewees' daily lives, with the people in the film choosing where and how they wanted to be filmed. The result was, for me, a pleasant surprise. In the interviews as each person spoke of their disability, they each offered a complex description, not a flat "diagnosis" such as blindness or epilepsy but a unique history, tracing the interacting factors in and development of their condition. And the locations and things the students wanted depicted visually in the tape were engagingly individualized, not something I could have imagined beforehand as a mise-en-scene. I was especially impressed as blind grad student Fred Gauble asked if I wanted to film him planting his garden. I accompanied him as he walked to a city compost pile with a shovel to dig up two large buckets of decayed leaves, and then filmed as he tenderly planted flower seed in the yard outside his grad student apartment. He was beautifying his environment for others to see.



Blind grad student Fred Gauble planting his

garden.



Kelly Wickham drives a van, adapted for a person using a chair.

Las Nicas—excerpts from interviews and conversations with Nicaraguan women in 1981 and 1982; photographic images of people, daily life, and public art not tied to the people speaking except poetically in the editing.

In a manner similar to what R. G. Collingwood pointed out about artistic process, what I wanted to say in *Getting Around*, what would shape the tape, was only something I learned as I went along. In terms of their motivation, what the students wanted to show to viewers was that they were living whole lives, complicated by disability. They were letting me as the filmmaker in on their daily life, so as to make aspects of “disability” that are relatively invisible into something distinct, something that could be publicly discussed.

Beyond my own pleasure of learning and expressing new insights gained from the students, after making both *In Plain English* and *Getting Around*, I also gained a renewed appreciation for the fact that making documentaries in and around one’s own workplace can affect that milieu, can participate in creating change there. In particular, these tapes often have been used in classrooms, usually with discussion and debate. This process of reception fascinates me, as it does all mediamakers, since people encounter my work beyond my ken, linking my perceptions to people I will never meet.

Naming and narrative in *Las Nicas*

In 1981, the third year of the Sandinista revolution, I had the opportunity to visit Nicaragua and teach production with the Sandinista labor union’s Super 8 Film Workshop. This was before the era of inexpensive home video equipment, so I went armed with a good cassette tape recorder, microphone and a lot of batteries. My own mediamaking goal was to document how change could occur



Before the revolution, I went to Catholic school and was a little middle class doll. I just wanted to be well dressed and buy records from the United States. I'm ashamed how removed from reality I was.

quickly in women's lives, something I rarely saw in my work in the women's movement in the United States. Before I left, I contacted my circle of women friends and elicited questions to ask the Nicaraguan women, the best one of which was, "Tell me how you spend a typical day from the time you get up till you go to bed." The invitation to teach Super 8 filmmaking felt like an exciting opportunity. Once there, I ran into some minor technical difficulties. Early in my stay, I was invited to a Sandinista labor conference for Nicaraguan women in a camp outside Managua. They did not have a mic for the sound system, so I gave up mine to the cause. As a result, I met a lot of women with whom I could do follow-up interviews but these had to be done with the tape recorder's built-in mic and the sound quality was not good. Further versions of what women told me would have to be elaborated and recreated from a script.

I came back with audiotapes and slides. A friend, Carole Isaacs, joined me for this then-future videotape on women in Nicaragua. When Carole went to Nicaragua in 1982, she did more in-depth interviews with women in the Managua area and shot more slides. We wrote a script for a slide show; for that we composed short, three- or four-sentence narratives from the interviews or from what we remembered from conversations with Nicaraguan women. We organized these small narrative segments according to topics: work, sexual politics, religion, family life, children, social participation and defense, and made an audio tape for the slide show that integrated folk music, popular music, and narratives performed by actors. The slide images included portraits, scenes from daily life, and images of popular art such as murals. Later, I edited that material into two master VHS tapes, one in Spanish and one in English.



In this neighborhood some women have such short memories. Before, that had to save money to bribe the *guardia* to buy back their children's lives. Now these women can only think about shortages of bread and sugar. But you can't blame them. They saw their children die, and now they want even more than they had before.



When the *guardia* killed our boys, we had to bury them in the streets. But we could not just put them into the ground like that. We wrapped them up in bedsheets and soon we had no sheets left.

The decision to base the tape [Las Nicas](#) [trans. The Nicaraguan Women; click to



People who never fought behind the barricades in the revolution call themselves Christians and Sandinistas. Where were they when we women went through the street picking up hands and arms and eyes off the ground?



My husband says he's a Marxist, but he still spends his salary on \$100 Jordache jeans.



see video] on narrative segments not attributed to individual women but expressive of a wide range of women's voices and experiences came both from material necessity and from our own position as enthusiastic supporters of the Nicaraguan revolution. We wanted to convey something new to U.S. audiences, but to do it in terms of the variety of individual histories that we encountered. Each small narrative segment about and from the Nicaraguan women seemed to suggest a whole story about women's lives and to illustrate yet another facet of individual history within the context of major historical movement and change.

The women who talked to us were highly self-conscious, expressively articulating what had shaped them in the past and what they could now imagine for themselves and their children. They talked to us and among themselves about their plans and purposes, with new insights into their current situation and into history. Telling stories is a prominent feature of Latin American conversational style, but now the narratives women wanted to tell were imbued with urgency, tracing causal connections and often drawing explicit political conclusions. It was an utopian moment, irresistible to Carole and me.

Because I was largely unemployed in those years, I did not have money to complete and distribute *Las Nicas* as a videotape until 1986. And it did not have the impact among leftists that we had hoped for. Too many voices, too many perspectives, too much artifice with a sound track consisting of acted narrative voices, popular Nicaraguan song, and added sound effects; and an image track made from color slides. Was it real? Did we make much of it up? Whose voice is it anyway, the filmmakers or the women perhaps heard but surely not filmed? Yet even as I see the tape today, I know I could not have made it any other way. Filmmaker and distributor Freude Bartlett gently critiqued *Las Nicas* after seeing it in the 80s—"a love song to the revolution," she proclaimed. And it is that, a congruence of emotion Carole and I felt with the women we met.

Change

The Nicaraguan women we met in 1981 and 82 spoke with an energy and dynamism that expressed confidence that they could organize to effect change. They could improve their workplaces, through innovation if not through more money. They could join with other family members to reshape personal relationships at home. They could join the militias, which one woman told me she considered the most effective way to recuperate from war trauma: "I'll meet them with a rifle in my hands." Teachers felt the need to research and rewrite the whole curriculum, no longer interpreting their history through colonizers' words and points of view. All of these endeavors were seen as part of collective process, as actively shaping the revolution itself.

A whole project of naming and re-naming was going on at every level of Nicaraguan society challenging taken for granted assumptions and categories. But this was not a smooth process; there were battles over what stories to tell, what meanings to impose, particularly around issues such as abortion, homosexuality, and sexual practice. I myself felt like Margaret Sanger, advocating for access to and more public promotion of birth control, particularly for girls, who often had babies in their early teens and so did not go on in school. At the same time that I felt enthusiasm for the accomplishments of the Sandinista revolution, I saw a familiar, more conservative process going on. When people decide to break with the past, they may make large-scale social and personal change, here for example in workplace organizing, schooling and childrearing, but even at a revolutionary moment, some behavioral patterns and social formations go unrecognized and unchallenged, and they continue on as before.



I wouldn't be afraid to fall in love with a conservative man. It is our job to raise people's consciousness, so I'd work on convincing him too.



Women who are politically active teach men a lot. It's like pairing an experienced ox with an inexperienced one. At first, the oxen pull in opposite directions. It looks ridiculous. But then they learn to pull together. That's how it is here with women and men.

There is a two-fold process leading to change and it goes on continuously. Change and understanding are dialectically co-constitutive. People working together and talking with others can also articulate a shared sense of need. Acting together and forging collective narratives shapes both the individuals within a group and the trajectory of the group itself. With shared definitions of their situation, people take a step to change and their understanding increases after they create change. Furthermore, even in times that seem relatively static in political terms, communities of people removed from centers of power keep alive alternate, resistant discourses that challenge what dominant institutions might posit as "the way things are" or "natural" or "common sense." Especially in literature, authors from minority groups often write novels that delineate subjectivities and relationships not made explicit or legitimated in the society at large.

The process of narrating one's own experience publicly so as to contribute to collective action for change is also emotional, since those who are oppressed often feel anger, self-doubt, humiliation, and a fractured sense of identity; their subjectivities are denied within hegemonic social discourse, and they may themselves not articulate such feelings publicly out of self-defense. However, when joined with others acting to change the injustice they face and to counter the widespread, socially enforced invisibility, trivialization, or misrepresentation of their situation, people often make public the traumas they have experienced—both in the outside world and inside their own mind—so as to "turn these to some good" for themselves and others.

I found an important contemporary example of feminist media activism while doing research several years ago for an essay on "Feminist Documentary Now." A web search on "women and documentary" reveals that one of the main topics for feminist documentary is rape, often accompanied by a web site on which women post narratives of their own experience and unite in projects to take action. Looking at those web sites shows how effective subversive cinema can be that begins with anger. Revisiting a painful experience like rape, especially as a witness in film or an activist on the Internet, becomes way to move beyond it instead of replaying it over and over. When documentary joins the web as means of communication, people together can shift from traumatic memory into socially effective action.

To conclude, within this process of creating change, the artist plays a valuable role. Everyday, people create and change the world by creating representations and isolating and patterning aspects of their experience. As the moments and places and people around us are continuously shifting, art expresses and concretizes some aspect of the location we are in. Since discourse, particularly institutional discourse is inflected by power and lends itself to omissions and suppression, the artist can choose work against some aspect of dominant discourse to express new insights in a perpetually subversive way.

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Notes

This essay is dedicated to the memory of Carole Isaacs.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



People watching [State of Emergency](#) projection of *Graven Images* on 23rd St, NYC, 2008.



Still from slideshow, *5 Days That Shook the World*, 2000, Allan Sekula in [State of Emergency](#) projection.

Flying under the radar: notes on a decade of media agitation

by [Ernest Larsen](#)

For the past decade Sherry Millner and I have worked together on a series of political/experimental film/ video screening projects that we initiated or were invited to organize. In what follows, with Sherry's help, I will attempt to put forward the major questions we encountered along the way—along with the still provisional/ partial answers we have come up with, so far.

In 2005 Sherry and I, out of a sense of ever-increasing outrage, initiated a collaborative video projection series titled *State of Emergency*. We solicited brief silent works from artists whom we knew. We intended to project the edited program of short pieces in the big picture windows of our second-floor loft on 23rd St. in Manhattan. We described *State of Emergency* as a silent shout-out against the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and the severe incursions against civil and human rights most prominently put in place by the Patriot Act, most of which measures are still to this day securely in place.

Contributors to the several editions of *State of Emergency* included Allan Sekula, Martha Rosler, Mary Kelly, Jen Lion, Walid Raad, Greg Sholette, Simon Leung's class at UCI, Sally Stein, Louis Hock, Jin-Yu Chen/James T.Hong, Marty Lucas, Michael Mandiberg, Vanessa Haney, Leslie Thornton, Jamie O'Shea, Nora Ligorano, Marshall Reese, John Greyson, Annetta Kapon, Yvonne Rainer and ourselves

The project was self-organized and deliberately aimed to bypass potential institutional constraints and gatekeepers, in favor of a form of direct action amenable to us as anarchist artists. We also aimed to engage not so much the art or film/video audiences that are (by self-definition) disciplined in advance but walkers, passersby, drivers on our busy street who would otherwise be unlikely to encounter such work, much of which was consciously if unconventionally agit-prop or at least deliberately provocative.

Each contribution was no more than three minutes long: to enable pedestrians, drivers, and bus passengers to grasp a video, text, or slideshow while still remaining engaged, if need be, in the ever-forward movement and noise of street life. Under the circumstances, we had to presume fragmented attention and attempt to seize hold of the temporarily distracted by the retina, if not the throat. The



Still from video, *Prototype: God Bless America*, 2006, Martha Rosler in *State of Emergency* projection.



Still of 'Gitmo prisoner' on anti-war float from video, *Sight Gag #3*, 2005, Sherry Millner/Ernie Larsen in *State of Emergency* projection.



Still of Madonna & Child statue from video *Sight Gag #7*, 2007, Sherry Millner/Ernie Larsen in *State of Emergency* projection.

politically decisive pertinence of the local and the all-but-immediate seemed crucial to us—*State of Emergency* was to be and remain unregulated, unsanctioned, and at times even unannounced, elements which to us recalled street theater and happenings of the 60s in New York and San Francisco, which in their planned spontaneity were often effectively interventionist, if not necessarily deliberately political. And in fact it did run at night, sometimes all night, in that guise—and silently so as to avoid potential attempts at police interference, which are all too common.

We found in practice that the distinctly urban style of nose-to-the-ground self-absorption (everybody going about their self-appointed tasks) on a busy street could demand additional tactics. For instance, we would get one or two or three people to stand across the street and stare up at our window-projections, to create a physical point of stalled interest. Some passersby who rang our bell had suggestions for images, facts, or slogans they were interested in seeing projected, which we followed up when possible. Technically, we needed no more than one portable projector (sometimes two) and a rear-projection screen (also portable) to get *State of Emergency* up and running. So we were able to run on a near-zero budget.

Our project's title has a fairly specific derivation. Conventionally, a government declares a state of emergency under conditions of natural disaster or extreme crisis. Special powers are swiftly invoked, military personnel and equipment deployed, resources mobilized, regulations suspended, rules waived, statutory immunities and liability protections for involved personnel and authorities invoked. Many democratic procedures and protections are suspended. The U.S. government's response to September 11 has amounted to a continuing and apparently permanent state of emergency. To this day, little more than the magical incantation of certain words (terror, security, patriotism) effectively sustains the legitimation of actions and protocols which might otherwise be deemed criminal or inhumane. Our project's title was perhaps even more directly inspired by Giorgio Agamben's reworking of a well-known didactic remark made by Walter Benjamin, during the fascist era. According to Benjamin,

"The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule."

To this Agamben rejoins:

"This sixty year old diagnosis has lost none of its resonance. And that is so... because power no longer has today any form of legitimization other than emergency, and because



Still from video *The State of Things*, 2006, Ligorano/Reese, of the melting of ice-sculpture 'Democracy' in *State of Emergency* projection.



Still, burning flag, *Graven Images (Version 1)*, 2008, Millner/Larsen in *State of Emergency* projection.



Still, blinded by patriotism, *Graven Images (Version 1)*, 2008, Millner/Larsen, in *State of Emergency* projection

power everywhere and continuously refers and appeals to emergency as well as laboring secretly to produce it. How could we not think that a system that can no longer function at all except on the basis of emergency would not also be interested in preserving such an emergency at any price.”

From this beginning on 23rd Street, other iterations, other sites and invitations followed--eventually including social centers in Sofia, Bulgaria and Thessaloniki, Greece, and an alternative gallery in Lisbon, Portugal, and as a window installation at street-level at the digital research site/gallery Eyebeam in New York. But very likely the most compelling early screening occurred on election night in 2006, when we projected *State of Emergency* in the windows of the restaurant Alias on the Lower East Side. Connecting the screening to the national election further enhanced what we really wanted to project on the screen of everyone's consciousness—that we were actually living in a State of Emergency.

The screening persisted for hours (on a loop) projected first outside the restaurant, and then, when a persistent rainstorm began, inside, turning the much-loved neighborhood gathering-space into a scene for table-hopping discussions of our prospective shared future of at least two-more-years-of-Bush-war-criminality. The casual conviviality of Alias, for which part-owner graphic artist Marybeth Nelson devised an election-night menu and a throw the rascals out cocktail, in concert with the *State of Emergency* program, all coalesced to focus what is unique about an event: that, at its best, it is unrepeatable. These distinctive elements were complemented by a salutary mix of participants: the diverse set we invited, hungry or wet passersby attracted by the somehow celebratory atmosphere, the waiters and the kitchen staff. Such a warmly localized note of thoughtful spontaneity worked to create a memorable political event.

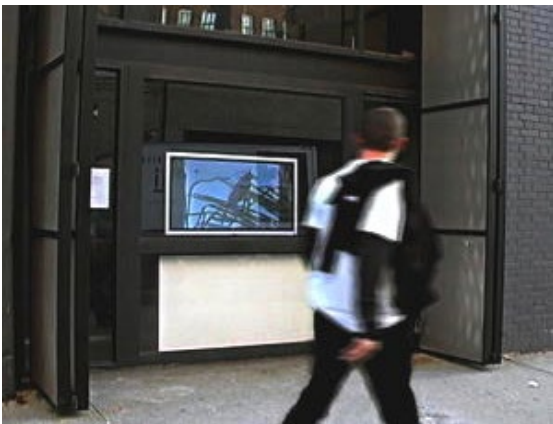
Another screening, in a somewhat later edition, occurred in a storefront in Oberhausen, as part of another project. This was another collaborative venture, commencing in a way a second trajectory for our work up to the present: We were invited to curate a set of 10 programs at the Oberhausen Film Festival, which we did in 2008, under the title “Border-Crossers and Trouble-Makers,” an ambitious and well-received attempt to sketch out the necessity, within the strict compass of the short-form film/video, for experiment (left undefined) in political media. Invited filmmakers ranged from a young Zapatista non-representative to the then 80-year-old Rene Vautier, life-long militant filmmaker who'd directed *Africa 50*, the first anti-colonialist film made in Africa.

Successive refinements of this activity, often while putting together new editions of *State of Emergency* include: 2009 at Zagreb a five day series, at the Subversive Film Festival under the title, “Reclaim the Future,” and this past season, for the Flaherty Foundation in New York, a six-part series under the title “Global Revolt,” (which we dedicated to our friend Allan Sekula). I will describe “Global Revolt” at some length below.

Finally, in this vein, we are presently in the last stages of a very



Still, Border Guard from video *Feral*, Louis Hock, 2004 in [State of Emergency](#) projection



Pedestrian watching *Predators in the Aviary*, by Millner & Larsen from [Permanent State of Emergency](#) exhibition in the Eyebeam Window Gallery, West 21 Street, NYC, April 2009.



Still, 'yellowbellyed hedge-twit' from *Predators in the Aviary*, 2009, by Sherry Millner/Ernie Larsen.

considerable 4-DVD project, to be distributed by Facets Multimedia (in Chicago) of what we hope and expect will amount to a new history of political experimental film, through extensive research, an effort comprising some forty plus short-form works, from at least twenty countries, and extending from 1913 to 2013—with the astute help of filmmaker Jill Godmilow. We feel that this project could have considerable pedagogical value, in part due to the concentration and (re-) discovery of new and neglected films, but also because socially and formally provocative shorter films (as opposed to features) tend to be more useful in creating and sustaining animated classroom and other public discussion—to turn a screening into a participatory event, in other words.

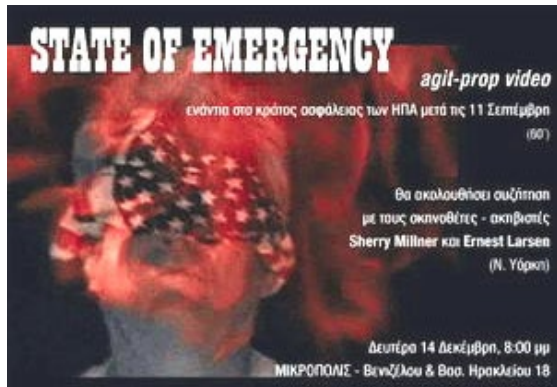
All of this seems to bring up another question. What should one aim for in putting together a political film series? By that I mean not merely a series that screens radical films. Sherry and I have long been interested in the indefinite potential for a film screening to achieve the status of a politicizing intervention that in some sense breaks through the conventions of a typical screening situation. At times, one's expectations of the political potential for transformation in such situations tend to exceed what's concretely possible. The old story: one's supple, if not febrile, imagination outruns rheumatic reality by a country mile. But I'd venture to say, at this point, that one should put one's resources, whatever they might be, into the largely imaginative effort of making *each* screening into an event.

It's all too true that the films one chooses, however incendiary in and of themselves, are seldom enough to do the enviable trick of moving even an enlightened consciousness much past the point of inertia. The construction of an event begs for convincing(ly) live elements as a deliberate supplement to the solely represented elements—the very films that the audience presumably came to see. The construction of an event can at its best produce a temporary/temporal structure capable of challenging such a relatively passive audience with enough unpredictable energy at the given moment into becoming viewer-participants (a fragile temporary not-quite-collective) who become willfully implicated in the issues and affects raised by the films in the program. This is and will remain a provisional formulation. In large part, this is because one soon learns as an organizing curator that such events are themselves in essence unrepeatable, that they must therefore be reinvented each time to remain effective. In other words, the singularity of an event (as opposed to the fact that a film is always the same film) is one possible key to the expansion of a political potential.

There is nothing particularly new or original about such an assertion. In our research, for example, we find that the pre-World War I French anarchist film association, Le Cinema du Peuple, which is apparently the first such cooperative in film history, when they first screened *La Commune*, directed by the peripatetic Spanish anarchist Armand Guerra, at the Palais des Fetes in Paris, assumed the necessity of creating such an event. And in our day, we see the antithesis of the multiplex in the urban proliferation of deliberately small-scale screening situations, which are routinely (sometimes too routinely) accompanied by speakers. In New York City, for example, we have in recent years seen a renaissance of such pocket cinemas, which always



Still, 'sharpbeaked hoodwinker' from *Predators in the Aviary*, 2009, by Sherry Millner/Ernie Larsen.



Poster for *State of Emergency* outdoor screening at Anarchist Bookfair, Thessaloniki Greece, 2010.

include discussions as part of each program/screening. These include Union Docs, the Spectacle Theater, and Light Industry, in addition to such sites as 16 Beaver St, which are not theaters but gathering spaces with some of the salient aspects of the anarchist social centers and squats now common in Europe and South America.

How does the Law of Unintended Consequences apply to political film screenings? I would venture to say that one test of a successful political film screening is whether it does elicit such unexpected responses. Early in 2010 we travelled to Vietnam to begin shooting a video about what that country felt like now to an American who was a draft resister (that is, myself) during the Vietnam War, which is, of course, known to the Vietnamese as the American War. Shortly after arriving in Ho Chi Minh City/Saigon, I emailed Hanoi DocLab, a new venue and workshop we'd heard about. Soon we were invited to do a screening of the current edition of *State of Emergency* when we journeyed north.

That screening proved to us, once again but differently, the perhaps inestimable value of direct engagement. Following our introduction of the project and then the screening itself, we engaged in a long give-and-take with an audience of about sixty mostly young people, many of whom were clearly artists. Early on, the discussion became focused almost entirely on how censorship works in the United States. This discussion was sparked by one video in the program, our own *Graven Images*, in which the politically tabu act of the burning of the U.S. flag is depicted, with dozens of such sacred red, white, and blue icons rapidly reduced to ashes. At the end of the short video we see that it is not some rabid anti-Americans performing this culturally proscribed act but the super-patriots of the American Legion, who have somehow been sanctioned to dispose of damaged flags on Flag Day, each year.

The Hanoi audience found it difficult to understand how we were allowed to screen in the U.S. such (literally, in this case) incendiary imagery. This led to a concrete discussion of how censorship of political ideas and images can operate at one or more of several points in the cultural process. For instance, internally, in a sense, censorship may occur at the point of conception—i.e. a political artist may decide not to make a certain work, for fear of or in anticipation of how it might be received. Or censorship may occur at the point of gaining funding to produce a work, knowing that its politics will cause it to be rejected. Or it may occur or at the point of creating a work, when a artist again has a crucial moment to consider how politically provocative a work could or should be (sometimes temporizing or cutting back—perhaps with the self-exculpatory excuse that the prospective audience/viewer may not be ready for overly radical work, etc. Or again we find it at the point of distribution, when the political artist, who has been “free” to produce the work suddenly finds that institutional or corporate gatekeepers block it.

To our surprise, the audience members were completely drawn into this discussion and insisted on drawing out its implications. A bit later, one young artist privately asked about how to push the limits in a potentially dangerous cultural situation such as that which existed in Vietnam. Still later, the next evening, following a performance to which we'd been invited, at a gallery space, we encountered some of the same audience members from our screening, and we had another

impromptu discussion of some of the same issues. We also discovered that it was very much a good thing that our screening/discussion at Hanoi DocLab had been so casually arranged—since it was the usual arrangement that such events when planned tended to be screened in advance by the local authorities, i.e. subject to possible censorship.

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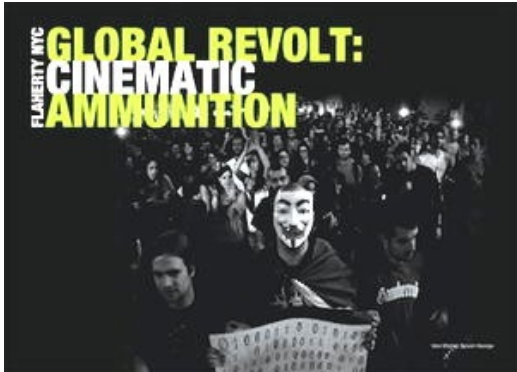
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Still, the last surviving communards, *La Commune*, Armand Guerra, 1914.



Postcard for *Global Revolt: Cinematic Ammunition*, Flaherty NYC screening & discussion series, Anthology Film Archives, Fall 2013.



Still from film *Garbage*, *New York Newsreel*,

In planning to produce *State of Emergency*, as we did, we had only thought of its potential reception by U.S. audiences. The fact that the program was silent was in fact an advantage in non-U.S. venues—the problem of translation was in practice elided. The fact that we needed to introduce to non-U.S. audiences the terms of the project's production and the unconventional ways and venues in which we had presented it effectively became part of its reception for such audiences. In Sofia, when shown at a social center, *State of Emergency* was drawn into larger debates there about the role of state violence and the militarization of the police in Sofia itself....And so the program functioned as a political spark for what was already on people's minds—as with the young Vietnamese artists in the Hanoi audience, who had clearly begun to wonder how and when and how far to challenge the cultural norms of the situation in Hanoi. The politics of the local situation overtook what we had thought were the obvious politics of the program itself, which for us revolved about the role of the U.S. as imperial police force. As with our other art work during the past decade, our curatorial projects, beginning with *State of Emergency*, pretty much embodied what seems in the present era like an almost de rigueur tension between the local (often focused as resistance) and the global (the domination of capital). But the local usually took over in these discussions—and we often found ourselves articulating the degree to which such issues, whatever they were, were in fact common ground in cities across the globe.

But how do we structure our programs—so as both to encourage and to leave room for such challenging discussions? How is it possible to structure programs as deliberate interventions, in other words? Or how is it possible to elicit the kinds of unexpected connections that we are interested in provoking? To begin to answer this, I will use the “Global Revolt” series as the prime example. For Global Revolt, with the immeasurable assistance of the folks at the Flaherty Foundation, which sponsored the series, and Anthology Film Archives, which was amazingly flexible, we further refined the approach we took at the Oberhausen and the Subversive Film Festivals. The Flaherty's aim and achievement has always been to create a forum for serious discussion of documentary films. Thus a basic event structure was already in place.

Assuredly, we must find the films first. For this, Sherry is very largely responsible as she is an extremely dedicated, unceasing researcher. However, even when she is able to find a film or a reference to a film on some usually obscure website, it can take weeks sometimes to track down the filmmaker/collective, to contact them, and involve them in the project. Nevertheless, pretty quickly, specific themes emerge from this ever-growing accumulation (and it is definitely ever-growing). Naturally, these themes are obviously reflective of our own interests, commitments, passions—and therefore, in a sense, already in advance make up a fairly coherent range of possibilities. These themes could be current enough to already on people's minds but then be refreshed from an unexpected angle—or be provocatively contradictory, to operate against assumptions securely in place. In the case of the latter, for instance, I inverted the familiar terms, truth and reconciliation, which everyone is routinely expected to agree with—in advance. As it happens, we don't altogether agree with those terms as such: so we put together a program titled, “Falsehood and Non-reconciliation.”

For seven years now we have been seeking out short-form

USA, 1968.



Still, toy skeleton from *Garbage*.



Still from film *Ausfegen*, Joseph Beuys & Jurgen Boch, Germany, 1972.



Still, Joseph Beuys & collaborators sweeping up in *Ausfegen*.

political/experimental films—rarely longer than 30 minutes—rather than features. We rarely screen films on either end of the spectrum—neither purely political conventional documentaries nor purely experimental, formalist, apparently apolitical works add enough to the mix we're after. We don't accept the arguments commonly put forward in favor of accessibility to a wide audience brought to bear in favor of conventional documentaries, nor do we accept the conventional avant-gardist argument in favor of the overriding value of the politics of form, in its seasonal variants. What interests us instead are the myriad ways and means in which experiments of radical politics and the politics of radical experiment overlap and enhance each other to create a third element. And this adventure is key to how we put individual programs together. We are interested in how apparently disparate films (films made in different countries, at differing historical conjunctures) comment and speak to each other. Therefore in a single program of around 90 minutes we must choose a number (five to eight) of films that we hope, in their unexpected range of connections, will create for audience/participants the texture of an event. Like all curators, we create the terms for a potential experience by selecting and ordering the films, with program notes that I write and a brief introduction (and welcome). We also schedule speakers, often the filmmakers themselves, and provide a knowledgeable moderator to take up those terms, or others if they so choose, from the actual experience of the program. Quite often, we also provide something extra, a supplement, of a kind. Consider the first program of the Global Revolt series, titled "Refuse and Refusal: Anti-Authoritarian & Avant-Gardist Interventions."

The notes for this program

"The truth of a society is in its detritus."—Ella Shohat & Robert Stam

"The world is our garbage, we shall not want." —Black Mask

The previously unquenchable spirit of the modernist avant-garde seems to have evaporated at almost the same moment as anti-authoritarian, autonomist, and anarchist movements re-surfaced in the 21st century. These films, which explore the unmistakable correspondence between refuse and refusal, should tell us a thing or two about this wholly unpredicted emergence.

Speakers: Ben Morea, Ayreen Anastas & Rene Gabri

Films in the series

FOR JOACHIM GATTI *Jean-Marie Straub (France, 2009, 3 min)*

On July 8, 2009, in Montreuil, outside Paris, Joachim Gatti, a 34-year-old filmmaker, participating in a peaceful demonstration, was severely wounded by a policeman's flashball bullet, losing an eye. The concentrated austerity of this video, making use of a quote from Rousseau, aptly expresses Straub's indomitable *j'accuse* against capital's violent defense of property vs. human rights. *For Joachim Gatti* is one of three contributions to the compilation film, *Outrage and Rebellion*, being screened in this series.

GARBAGE *New York Newsreel (USA, 1968, 10 min)*

A radical film collective documents a collective action in defiant support of a NYC sanitation workers strike. The now-legendary Lower East Side anarchist group, Up Against the Wall, Motherfuckers, carry their uncollected garbage up to the then new and pristine white citadel of high culture, Lincoln Center, and dump it there on the marble steps. On the disjunctive soundtrack a group critique of the action permits us to experience theory and practice as inseparable parts of a single process. Ben Morea, one of the founding members



Still, McDonalds in St. Petersburg, Russia, *Expulsion From Paradise*, Andrey Ustinov & Natalya Nikolaeva, 2002.



Still, 'Eve' in the 'Garden,' *Expulsion From Paradise*, Ustinov & Nikolaeva, 2002.

of the Motherfuckers, will be present for the screening.

AUSFEGEN Joseph Beuys & Jurgen Boch (Germany, 1972, 26 min)

Following a militant May Day demonstration along Karl Marx Strasse in then East Berlin Joseph Beuys and 2 students sweep the streets with meticulous care, wielding red-bristled brooms, in solidarity with guest workers. The action, accompanied by a voiceover, together provide a rigorously performative argument for the radical democratization of art production. Where do the three men dump all that trash? In what sense is dirt also art?

EXPULSION FROM PARADISE Andrey Ustinov & Natalya Nikolaeva (Russia, 2002, 2.5 min)

A performance in a St. Petersburg McDonald's reenacting the myth of Adam & Eve's expulsion from Eden. To show that the Great God Ronald McDonald provides free food for all the performers beatifically wander naked from table to table, preaching the global message of neo-liberal love. But then disaster strikes!

ISLE OF FLOWERS Jorge Furtado (Brazil, 1989, 12 min)

Cited by Chris Marker as 'a masterpiece,' *Isle of Flowers* is described by Furtado himself as "a letter to a Martian who knows nothing of the earth and its social systems." At the Isle of Flowers pigs eat better than people. The film uses inventive animation and a parodic mock-lecture style of narrative explication to link the urban bourgeois family to the rural poor who scavenge the garbage dump, aka the Isle of Flowers.

THE LAND BELONGS TO THOSE WHO WORK IT Chiapas Media Project (Mexico, 2005, 15 min)

Collectively made, this film details a tense confrontation between masked Zapatistas farming unused land and federal officials intent on ecotourist development. The elaborate politeness on both sides of this struggle do nothing to mitigate what is at stake.

About the filmmakers

The many films of 80-year-old **Jean-Marie Straub** and his now-deceased partner Daniele Huillet are internationally celebrated for their rigorous disregard for the conventions of film and the social order. As Martin Walsh put it, "Straub's [& Huillet's] radical conception of film creation presupposes our critical intelligence's being brought to bear constantly upon what we are viewing." Among their other films are *Class Relations* (1984) and *Not Reconciled* (1965).

Started in 1967, **New York Newsreel** was easily the most influential and productive radical film collective of its era. Their many films, made very quickly in the heat of battle, still resonate with the spirit and the letter of their original intransigence. Among their films: *Columbia Revolt*, *People's Park*, and *Off the Pig* (*Black Panther*).

Joseph Beuys—one of the most influential artists of the 20th century, the inventor of "social sculpture," and a pioneer of performance art—and television director Jurgen Boch collaborated on this very rarely screened film.

Andrey Ustinov & Natalya Nicolaev are Russian artists and performers, who collaborated on this film/performance announce: "Art belongs to vandals!"



Still, women & kids, *Isle Of Flowers*.

Ustinov lives and works in Cologne. One current project: “Molotov Cocktail” which involves a hilariously quixotic attempt to gather up the scattered fragments of said Cocktail to reconstruct in its original form, hearkening, say Ustinov, to a global “landscape of incessant guerilla warfare.”

Based in Porto Alegre, Brazilian director **Jorge Furtado** is a master of the subversive collage film, which aligns his work with a great tradition in Brazilian modernism/postmodernism from Carlos de Andrade onwards. His most recent feature, *The Man Who Copied* (2003), like *Isle of Flowers*, moves effortlessly, and with graceful irony, from genre to genre.



Still of brain in *Isle Of Flowers*, Jorge Furtado, Brazil, 1989.



Still, boy poisoned by toxic waste in body bag, *Isle Of Flowers*.

Since 1998 **The Chiapas Media Project** has distributed over 6000 indigenously produced videos, documenting autonomous Zapatista communities. The videos shot by and in Zapatista communities cover a wide variety of subjects. Titles include: *Water and Autonomy*, *We are Equal: Zapatista Women Speak*, and *Education in Resistance*.

What we hadn't counted on in putting the program together was that filmmaker John Greyson and physican/activist Tarek Loubani had been imprisoned in Cairo during protests (by supporters of ousted president Mohammed Morsi) that had been violently disrupted by Egyptian security forces. We had already programmed one of Greyson's many fine films (*14.3 Seconds*) for the fifth program. Alarmed and concerned as we were, I read aloud to the packed audience at Anthology Film Archives, the letter from prison that Greyson and Loubani had written and that had just begun to be circulated on the Internet. In the end, shortly before the fifth program came around, the two men had been released after weeks in jail. I wrote John (who is an old friend) and asked if he'd like to appear on Skype in the discussion period following the screening (for which Nadja Millner-Larsen, a remarkable writer on radical culture, was to be the moderator). He graciously agreed—and we also added to that fifth program his short video, finished the day after he returned home, *Prison Arabic in 50 Days*. My overall point here is perhaps too hastily summed up by the word *immediacy*: very probably an irreducible aspect of any prospective advance in political struggle. In one sense, without intending to we framed one dimension of the “Global Revolt” series in an ongoing specific political struggle and its consequences for one Canadian filmmaker. This validation of immediacy (an affective immediacy shared by our audience, thereby brought together that much more certainly) gave the still new idea of Global Revolt, which we were trying to measure and understand, a sharper edge.



Still, Zapatista farmers, *The Land Belongs To Those Who Work It*, Chiapas Media Project, Mexico, 2005.



Still, Zapatista woman farmer digging the earth, *The Land Belongs To Those Who Work It*.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Subversive media: when, why, and where

by Chuck Kleinhans



Sergei Eisenstein's *October*: the storming of the Winter Palace. There was an annual re-enactment of the event and the director filmed the anniversary celebration.



Zack Snyder's *300*: The Spartans face off against the enemy's fearsome Battle Rhino.

Contingent

Because subversion or opposition begins with difference, with being “the opposite” of the dominant, the normal, it is easy to slip into the thought that anything that is different is then in fact subversive.[1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] That posits an abstract dominant and imagines an abstract resistance. But the historical world is much more complex than that. And what something “really is” is itself always contingent, that is dependent on time and place, on an evolving situation. That’s the more difficult thing to grasp because it means not thinking about “essence” but rather thinking about “process.” About change.

We might remember that in the darkest days of the rise of Nazi Germany, driven into exile Bertolt Brecht wrote about what kind of message politically committed artists could make in their work. He said that under the circumstances the most radical thing that could be said within Germany was to speak of change. Against Hitler’s Thousand Year Reich, the artist could simply

say that things will change, that the future will be different. I think we can use that thought today as well. In a time when the campaign slogan, “Change We Can Believe In,” seems pretty worn out even to Obama’s liberal supporters, what can we imagine? What new change can we imagine and work for?

One great advantage of media art—of sound and moving image based art—is that it is essentially, inherently a time art, and time is dynamic. Media art almost always accommodates and implies change: of time, of place, of rhythm, of things represented or expressed. Time arts lend themselves easily to the representation of change. To understand this with more depth, it means that we can see “subversive”—that which is against the existing dominant order—as always contingent. Subversiveness depends on multiple relations, on multiple factors, and those things are in process, changing.

To be subversive, artists are often inspired to find new forms to express new ideas. The traditional ways are not working. And new forms can and do have a certain shock effect. They are startling, attention-getting, and in turn can confuse or shock audiences used to and comfortable with traditional forms. Sometimes this leads to thinking that formal shock is in and of itself subversive, rather than seeing artistic innovation more accurately as a means to achieving a more sophisticated end, one with a more historical view, a longer view. Not just shock for shock’s sake, but thinking of the aftermath, the lasting effect.

To unpack my argument a bit more: I’ll put forward three propositions, and then test them with an example.

One. A radical form can be a powerful expressive means, but it does not guarantee a truly subversive artwork. The formalist fallacy confuses a device, a technique, a style, with its effect.

Two. A powerful or shocking content can produce a spectacular reaction for the viewer, but that does not automatically make it deeply meaningful or politically effective.

Three. An artist’s Sincere Intention, especially when delivered with strong sentiment, does not guarantee a truly subversive artwork. Intention is not meaning. Sincerity is not enough.

First, I want to test these three ideas against a well-known recent rap music video, “No Church in the Wild.”[2] It is five minutes long and performed by Jay Z and Kanye West with Frank Ocean and The-Dream. The song was the opening track on a new collaborative album, *Watch the Throne* (2012), and the music video has received over 30 million views on YouTube as of this writing.

I’m not an expert on rap music and I won’t try to discuss the music, the vocal performances, and the way the specific song fits into the careers of its two central performers. But I will note that Kanye West in particular contributed a new strain to rap by taking on issues more typically seen in religious themed art: such personal morality, conventional pieties. The title itself, “No Church in the Wild,” refers to a trope found in some branches of Christianity, pointing out that Jesus himself did not have a church and thus calling into question the need for an institutional church, such as the Church of Rome. The song’s lyrics

include typical rap themes: positing an authenticity in solidarity with one's fellows, and opposition to the dominant order, celebrating rule-breaking hedonism and brotherhood, and drug use. The distinctive Kanye West themes are rejection of formal religion and conventional pieties (e.g., monogamy). But more important than specific details or lines in the song are the vocal performances of Jay Z and Kanye West who dominate the audio, presenting themselves as strong black men who are in control, in charge, aggressive, and self asserting. This mode of presentation fits West's star image, in particular, which includes well-known public scenes of his extreme macho behavior and arrogant declaiming.

The song was released as part of a complex marketing strategy (detailed in Wikipedia),[3] that released different album tracks in stages leading to a full album release. The music video followed later. The film was made autonomously without the onscreen presence of West or Jay Z. Romain Gavras, son of the 1960s-70s director Costa Gavras, produced it in Prague. The visuals show an all male street confrontation between heavily armored riot police and a crowd of protestors who attack and are attacked in turn. At some moments the lyrics seem to be (vaguely, associatively) linked to an image, or an image seems to echo/reinforce/connect with lyrics. But there are many in which there is no connection. This in turn produced various critiques, such as hearing Kanye describing lines of cocaine on a Black woman's skin as like stripes on a zebra while we see the fierce clash of police and protestors.[4]

Overall the music video is direct, powerful, well shot and edited. The imagery appropriates anarchist Black Bloc tactics (more familiar in Europe than the United States) in which all protestors are dressed in black with masks, sunglasses, etc. hiding their faces. This tactic makes the group anonymous and harder to identify later, and also it's more threatening at the moment of the confrontation. Of course the police, with face and body shields and gas masks, also lose individual identity and also become part of a mass. This effect in the video is exaggerated, with the confrontation being filmed in increasing darkness with figures often in silhouette when shown, and with smoke (from tear gas) also obscuring detail. Cutaways to neoclassical public statues, as if they are onlookers, provide spare recognition.

The strongest and most emotionally effective part of the video is the representation of defiance to constituted authority (the state, the police) by the demonstrators who commence the street fighting. The most powerful leading image here is the very opening in which a single figure with a Molotov cocktail lights the incendiary weapon, approaches the police line, and hurls it at the cops. The male figure is marked as a large black man whose figure is an associative visual expression of the voices of Jay Z and Kanye West, themselves large strong black men, whose lyrics here are bold, aggressive, defiant.

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"No Church in the Wild" image sequence



1. The video opens in near silence as we see and hear a lighter ignite a Molotov cocktail (click, whoosh) CU.



2. The music begins. A large leading figure backed by his fellows hurls the Molotov cocktail. Most of the action cuts back and forth from the police line to the protestor line down the narrow defile of an urban street. A certain amount of fog, heavy shadow, and a monochrome color palette serves to highlight the yellow flame.



3. After throwing the bottle the leader raises his arms in defiance, giving the “fuck you “ gesture with both hands which is echoed by his fellows.



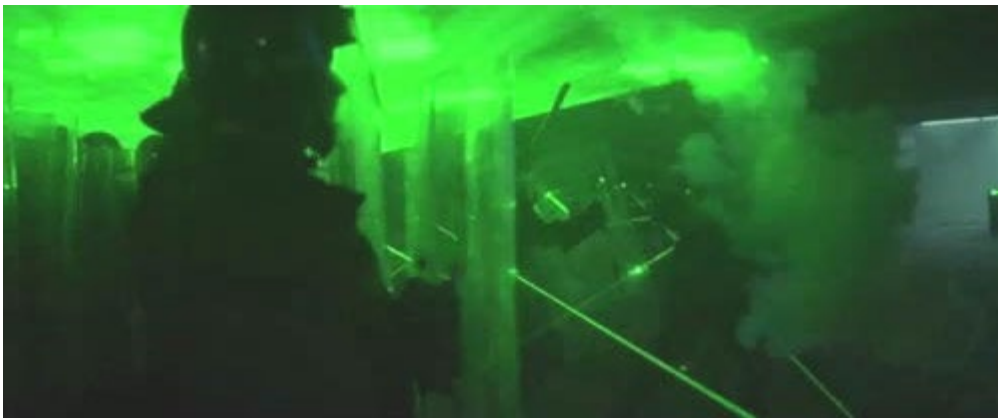
4. After the protestors rush the police we have a quick montage of the clash with police shown to dominate with tear gas and pepper spray in the face of individuals they catch, horseback police beating individuals with batons, and other assaults. A fallen black man is menaced by a fierce police dog. The close-ups tend to show the civilians in fear and pain.



5. The already dark and obscure scene turns more to night with flames from fires set by the protestors, overturning cars, pushing a flaming police car into the police lines.



6. New Molotov cocktails penetrate the police line sending long trails of flaming gasoline. Using the z axis as the line of flame movement in the deeply silhouetted scene combines contrasting color and movement to heighten drama.



7. As the scene becomes even more obscure due to smoke/tear gas clouds. A new element appears with neon green laser lights, familiar as gun sight target tools. But these also flash on and off giving an impression reminiscent of the use of lasers in concert venues. Police menace on the street is vaguely associative with the experience of hearing Jay Z and Kanye West on the sound track as if in an arena show.



8. Again the initial Molotov cocktail thrower faces off against the police line, arms raised in a repetition of the theme of defiance.



9. In the finale, after a cop engulfed in flames runs back to the police line and collapses, the image returns to another triumphant image of the protestors, this time joined by a rampant elephant, unexplained and not seen before in the video.

If we try to think about the music video and ask about its meaning, things get sticky. We can say it represents something vague and general, such as “defiance,” which would let us account for the images of fighting with the police and for the lyrics, even when they refer to something quite remote from the events displayed, such as lines of cocaine or the ethics of “open marriage” relationships. But perhaps this is the best we can do given the severe dissociation of image track and music track.

The work does have a pretty radical form in terms of the disassociation of image and music. But is that politically radical or a flaw? We never learn what the protestors are protesting. Many of the mostly white protestors look like skinheads and the European equivalent of violent youth who actively attack immigrants and minorities and support an extreme right political stance. How should that be read? But this video also shows a racially mixed group. Certainly it does have powerful content in images of street fighting. And that might remind us of the romantic fantasy heroic anthems of an earlier era: the Rolling Stone’s “Street Fighting Man” (1968), the Jefferson Airplane’s “Volunteers” (1969), and even the more skeptical/dubious songs of the Beatles’ “Revolution,” (1968) or the Beach Boys “Student Demonstration Time.” (1971).

However, in the video there is no particular political point being developed, it seems. Instead the visceral thrill of street fighting appears as the emotionally engaging part of the “defiance” theme. There’s come to be a name for this kind of media, “riot porn.” According to the Urban Dictionary site:

“Various forms of media that show people rioting, protesting, or striking that is watched for enjoyment value. Usually involves excessive police force and brutality.”

“I wanted to go to bed at a reasonable hour but stayed up till 3 AM watching riot porn on youtube.”[5]
[\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

Riot Porn is usually dismissed by the left on political grounds as viewers just seeking the thrill of anti-authoritarian action rather than contributing to an effective grassroots movement for change. (There is a defense of it on affective grounds which I will detail later.)

If we look for my third measure, sincere intention, it seems the answer is “clearly not.” For the musicians: this is just another song, well within common rap themes. For the filmmaker: it might well be a calling card film in a bid to be the next Zach Snyder (*300*, *Sucker Punch*, *Man of Steel*, etc.).

Let me offer a political critique. Is this video subversive? Well, it depends. In a general way, both lyrics and images challenge the dominant power structure, dominant mainstream values. But does it really go very far? Rap music is always about a confrontation with “power,” yet it is itself part of the dominant commercial music system—especially at the level of Jay Z and Kanye West who are multi-millionaires, earning money through concerts and music royalties. Romain Gavras’ video can also be read as a spectacular image out of an action movie. So the video recycles images of transgression, but is it also really transgressive in itself?

Gavras’ video can also be read as a spectacular image out of an action movie. When I see the image of the rampant elephant in the last shots, I always think of a producer running up to Gavras on the set, jubilant: “We have enough money in the budget to rent the elephant!” As someone who has participated in various civil demonstrations, marches, and events where the demonstrators faced armed vigilantes, or hostile police we assumed might attack us, and so forth, the elephant is such a level of hyperbole that I can only be amused. “Don’t forget to bring your elephant” to the next demonstration. When I made this point in my talk at SF State, someone objected and argued that it was an easily understood symbol of uprising, like the rampant lion statues in Eisenstein’s *October*. I said in response: that the entire five minute music video had no larger narrative frame in contrast to well known dramatic fiction depictions of political rebellion such as Eisenstein’s *October* (1928), Kubrick’s *Spartacus* (1960), Pontecorvo’s *Burn!* (1969) or Sergio Giral’s *The Other Francisco* (1975). Rather than using the images in the way that they appear in such clearly politically motivated films, the music video strikes me as basically a calling card piece to show prospective producers. “No Church in the Wild” shows the director could work in the same vein as say, Zach Snyder. Snyder has made a reputation for spectacular action sequences which often go completely over the top (the battle rhino in *300*, the steampunk battlefield in *Sucker Punch*, etc.). Romain Gavras has made his bid.

Where the music video, “No Church In The Wild,” works fairly effectively is on the level of fantasy affect. It makes street fighting look like something adventurous and worth trying, if just for the thrill. There’s actually a fairly thoughtful critical discussion of this aspect of “riot porn” and Black Bloc tactics that has taken place. Those who put a positive spin on this kind of imagery tend to read it as a gateway tactic to recruit (especially) white middle class youth to the political struggle. (Note well: this means males, and carries the peculiar ideology that people of color are already “politicized.”)

But to return to the question, just how subversive is this music video? The short answer is “that depends.” There’s a well-developed leftist critique of this kind of anarchist confrontationism. First of all, it involves a superficial attack on symbols (smashing the windows at Starbucks doesn’t stop neoliberal globalization). Second, it is a tactic that is easily infiltrated by police provocateurs, whose goal is to provoke protestors into acts for which they can be arrested. And in the media, the protestors then lose public support by picturing them as dangerous to the public good. Third, street fighting has been used as a cynical recruiting tool by miniscule groups. They aim to show they’re tough, the rightful leaders. They deliberately intend to provoke police. They imagine this will make them appear to be the radical vanguard.[6] Fourth, the tactic opens a space for police to take on greater powers by seeming to be the guardians of peace and security. Further, direct aggression against police is not widely supported by the masses of people under most circumstances and can be manipulated by the dominant media. Street rioting confuses spontaneous militancy (which is thrilling for participants) with effective action that has a long-range effect. It is founded in a confusion of tactic and strategy.

We might remember here an old left adage: “Terrorism is People’s War without the people.” That is, the actual process of guerilla warfare or asymmetrical war uses some of the same tactics, but in the case of riot porn, what is lost is the political logic of understanding action itself as a developmental process with various interacting phases. Effective political change involves legislative and electoral action, challenges within the legal system, community organizing, nonviolent direct action, and on occasion violent action. The underlying strategy of mass mobilizations as public displays of noncompliance and protest can show the community’s depth of sentiment and the range of the population committed to change. Anarchist “propaganda of the deed” is an elitist attempt to cut short the long hard work of organizing a democratic base. It appeals to emotion rather than rational self-interest, political ideals, and community solidarity.

Another way to think about this would be by referring to some of our own recent history. “No Church in the Wild” is now three years old. But rather than this dramatic fiction, let’s look at some documentary images. These are from a standard Google image search for “Ferguson,” meaning the protests at Ferguson, Missouri, around the police shooting of Michael Brown in summer 2014. Subsequent protests followed the grand jury acquittal of the policeman involved in the fall.[7]

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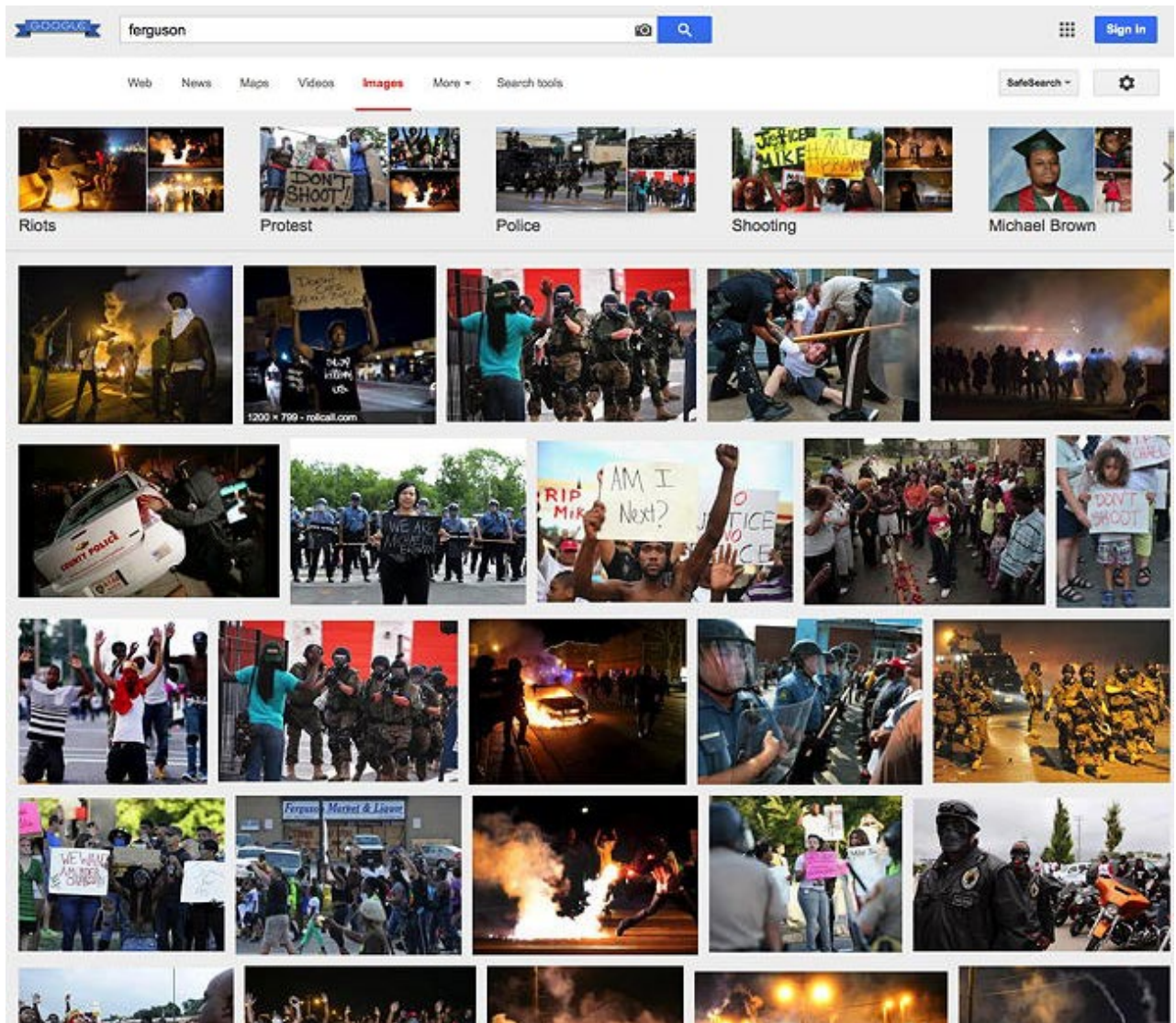


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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Ferguson image essay



Google Image search: "Ferguson Missouri protest"



1. Probably the image that most directly invokes “No Church in the Wild” is this one of a large black man hurling an incendiary tear gas canister back at the police. It is especially dramatic in highlighting his pitching stance, his U.S. flag T-shirt, his very long dreadlocks, the fire and smoke of the gas, the two onlookers who seem to be cheering him on, and so forth.[8] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]



2. The “classic” Ferguson image during the first days of the protest. Civilian demonstrator with hands raised in the “Don’t Shoot” surrender gesture against combat armed police SWAT teams with weapons drawn and aimed at unarmed protestor. This type of image immediately raised awareness about the problem of increasing police militarization since 9/11.



3. Another news photo using similar nighttime lighting with backlit smoke from tear gas.



4. Again black bodies under dramatic smoke-filled backlighting. The protests took place on hot summer nights, and many of the male youth were shirtless, or used the shirt as a barrier to the tear gas. Bottles of water were carried to wash off the gas residue.



5. Shooting under available light and backlighting produced dramatic silhouettes, here with a female protestor giving the “fuck you” to the police line. The familiar McDonald’s Golden Arches sign references one of the first geographic reference points for the demonstrations.



6. A virtual chorus line of protestors with the now familiar “don’t shoot” upraised arms.



7. In November, anticipating new protests when the grand jury report would be released (at 8 p.m. on a Monday night) cops line up outside the police headquarters under a Christmas Holiday banner.

Anyone and everyone familiar with basic image analysis would immediately see the similarities between the news photos and the fictional music video. And they would also be immediately aware that the news photo images don't tell any "truth," are not themselves "visible evidence," without additional contexting: the caption, the explanation, the on-the-scene report by the photographer or other eyewitnesses as to the "meaning" of what is captured in the image. All that is basic image semiotics, raising the question of history: of fact, and interpretation.

If I were teaching an introductory class in visual media this semester, I'd probably have the students do something in terms of making a photo essay or a montage or collage from these images (and others they could find on Google), and then complicate it with captions, editing for rhythm, maybe adding different soundtracks. What would we make of the music track of "No Church in the Wild" if accompanied by a mashup of Ferguson still and moving images? The aim of such an exercise would be having the students see the different aspects of such images, how juxtaposition and framing work, how captions or voice over work. In other words, there is a politics to this, and a historical grounding here (and importantly whatever side we take).[9]

History, and the politics of history, are the "reality check" on subversion. Does this fly? Riot porn is image art that celebrates and depicts violent confrontation with authorities, usually the police. Some of it is locally generated (documentaries of protests and actions), some of it is in corporate media (the popular video game Grand Theft Auto can stand for a huge assortment of such material).[10]

Two asides

While I don't have the space to develop full arguments here, on further thought after getting feedback at the conference and reading a bit more on riot porn, there are two more issues I'd like to note. I'll develop a new discussion of them in later writings, because they are

important to consider in depth. One is making the case for riot porn; the other is discussing the role of affect or emotion in radical media art.

There has been an expanding discussion of riot porn among people trying to analyze the politics of social media/digital media. Leah A. Lievrouw's *Alternative and Activist New Media* (Cambridge UK: Polity Press Digital Media and Society Series, 2011) provides an expansive survey based largely on the academic secondary literature with a good discussion of Indymedia and a chapter, "Getting People on the "Street": Mediated mobilization." In *Transgression 2.0: Media, Culture, and the Politics of a Digital Age*, ed. David J. Gunkel and Ted Gournelos (NY: Continuum, 2012) critics survey a wide variety of counter media ranging from alternative journalism, pornography, particular fandoms (e.g. the *Saw* series of horror films). Included is a survey of anarchist inspired riot porn by Michael Truscello, "Social Media and the Representation of Summit Protests: YouTube, Riot Porn, and the Anarchist Tradition." Truscello expands the framework to consider political activists who are both for and against the trend. As an extended monograph, *Digital Rebellion: The Birth of the Cyber Left* by Todd Wolfson (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), presents a greater historical and international range and contains a thoughtful line of political argument critiquing the weaknesses of the "horizontal" organizing pattern of Indymedia and the Occupy Movement.[11]

Perhaps the most compelling argument for riot porn can be found in Maple John Razsa's article "Beyond 'Riot Porn': Protest Video and the production of Unruly Subjects," *Ethos: Journal of Anthropology*, 79:4, 496-24.[12] Based in ethnographic fieldwork with a small Croatian anarchist group, Razsa reports the fervent enthusiasm the young activists have for riot porn.

From the abstract:

".... Many appropriations of the technology, including those by human rights advocates, rest on the theory that 'seeing is believing' While I encountered such realist uses of video during fieldwork with direct action movements in the former Yugoslavia, activists are also preoccupied with videos depicting the most physical confrontations with the police, videos they sometimes referred to as 'riot porn'. They engage these videos for the sensory, affective and bodily experiences they facilitate. Indeed, activist practices around and claims for video indicate that they understand video as a technology of the self, using it to forge emotional relationships with activists elsewhere, steel themselves for physical confrontation and cultivate new political desires."

Razsa both reports on and adds his own criticism of the group's attitudes (and those of other European anarchists) giving the dramatic example of videos which are simply international mashups of street fighting with no specificity of place, date, time, issues, etc. The thrill of watching violent confrontation takes over.[13]

Closely related, the issue of the emotional nature of radical media has often been neglected in left film theory and criticism. Perhaps because right wing critics often point at left films as romantic fantasies, or hagiography, or pure propaganda, the left has tended to be defensive, even silent about this. In addition, for the last half-century progressive film theory has tended to validate the cool, rational style of strict formalist frameworks rather than emotive aesthetics.[14]

While obviously radical media has access to the whole range of emotions from humor to sorrow, from heroic thrill to dramatic fear, there is a longstanding tradition of working

sympathy for purposes of persuasion. The melodramatic appeal of sympathy for victims and admiration for resistance and rebellion are common features of realist documentary and naturalist narrative. Combined with spectacle and familiar stories such as the embattled small band or lone rebel, such works easily evoke well-trained responses.

Although above I gave a specifically political critique of riot porn in the context of the limits of (many) anarchist tactics and strategies, I would not assert that emotion itself is negligible radical media work. To provide a simplified background we can remember one of the classic lines of thought in Western aesthetics. In laying out his ideal Republic, Plato argued against art's mimetic qualities as dangerous, inherently deceptive, because people would be influenced imitate bad behaviors if viewed. Only exemplary attitudes such a hymns and praise for leaders would be allowed. Famously Aristotle answered the objections by proposing catharsis in his poetics of tragedy. Yes, he agreed, tragedy can show bad behavior such as murdering one's children or defying constituted authority, but the bad emotions that are depicted and aroused are washed away by the dramatic conclusion. The audience doesn't leave the theatre with politically incorrect feelings and ideas but those things are released, mellowed out, in the experience. Again, famously, Brecht argued against this Aristotelian theatre. (Perhaps most obviously in the naturalist-realist form of Ibsen's well-made drama, and even more conventionally in its commercial stage forms.) Brecht wanted people to think, and go beyond the emotional pleasures of a self contained theatrical experience. This was often taken up in the 1960s and 70s film theory by eschewing all emotion. The ideal was a hyper-rational work that used strict form to repress the affective dimension of art: a denial of emotion (except perhaps for high irony).

Actually Brecht was not pushing for a formal renunciation of emotion, but he argued for a model close to the cabaret or boxing match where, gathered with others, one might experience an intense engagement with the songs and performance or the round of punching, and then in the interval relax and discuss, reflect on and converse about what one had just experienced. Rather than being swept away on a tide of emotions, one would also have retrospective and critical experience. Room to think about it.

While I'm just being speculative here, I'd offer that there is a significant difference between the emotional dimensions of political and historical dramas on the one hand and those of purely speculative fictions on the other. In the first category we might test this with a film such as *Battleship Potemkin* (Eisenstein, 1925) which does brilliantly evoke the justice of mutiny, although it also has to deal with the issue of the failure of the 1905 revolt's failure while ending on an obligatory triumphal note. In contrast, "No Church in the Wild", has no historical dimension. And as a counter example we could consider the rather large category of dystopian future films. Does *Snowpiercer* (Bong Joon-Ho, 2013), for example, while clearly a fantasy also provide a certain emotional force and pleasure by postulating the eventual success of a class rebellion that ends in a hopeful future? The question needs more investigation.

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A shift of terms

The examples that I've worked with here so far are pitched in a very masculine and confrontational vein. That's because I wanted to present and critique what is often thought to be the most subversive, the most radical, the most self-evidently challenging to the dominant order, to the taken for granted. But there's another way to think of subversion, one often overlooked precisely because it is imbedded in the commonplace, in the everyday. Understanding this too depends on thinking of contingency, of the audience, of the powers that are present, of working within institutions.

I'm going to discuss a few illustrative moments from a 46-minute documentary made for Turkish state television. Presenting women caring for newborns, babies, and infants, it is titled *Lullaby* (Ninni, 2003) and is by a Turkish woman producer/director, Zehra Tülin Sertöz.[15] (I'm preparing a longer article on several of her works; here, just a sampler.) [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

To understand why and how it is gently subversive, you need to understand the larger historical context of Turkey, and of the role of TRT, Turkey Radio-Television, a state agency. Turkey is one of the most modernized and Westernized nations in the Middle East. Strategically positioned, with Arab neighbors to the south and east, and Soviet power to the north, it had a long period of military rulers in the post WW2 era, finally becoming more democratic. Since the 1980s the economy has grown, but so has income inequality and class antagonism. This has fueled Islamic populism and the current government reflects that. At the same time, Turkey has dealt harshly with the Kurdish independence movement within its borders, and it has a long-standing record of imprisoning critical journalists.[16]

Within this framework, Turkey has been relatively liberal in terms of giving women education and an active role in social life in more urban areas. Given that State Television exists to validate the existing dominant values, some of which silence women, or ignore them, or neglect their voice, how can you give women an expressive presence? Particularly poor women, women in remote and rural areas, women whose very language is actively repressed on television if they speak Kurdish, or is seldom heard if they are migrant agricultural laborers from Syria (and therefore speaking Arabic, not Turkish). How do you make a documentary about women, when in traditional communities a *spokesman* would report what women thought and said?

The answer for Sertöz's poetic imagination was to make a film about a subject in which women were the experts, and had knowledge that men didn't. Thus organizing the film around the fact and metaphor of the lullaby allowed women to speak, to sing, to tell about their experience in their own native languages and dialects, and from all over the country, ranging from rich to poor, from rural isolation and migrant labor to successful urban professionals and wealthy couples. We also hear from elders who talk of the old days, and young new mothers who have the latest technologies at hand.

Lullaby weaves a complex investigation of the practices and materials of infancy and women's domestic labor. Here two passages that deal with past social norms and current rural agricultural workers:[17]

Lullaby visual essay



The film is bookended with two heart-warming sequences. The first presents a midwife attending a newborn (the soundtrack begins with the baby's first cries). The conclusion shows a small herd of lambs greeting their mothers (and vice versa) at the end of a day of grazing. Bleats and nursing as the sun sets makes for a natural sentimentalism.

Within this framework, the film raises issues of women's double day and class differences with the women speaking directly. The narrator-director at other points makes a rather poetic statement on how all mothers hope that their child will not have to live through a war, and asks why people can be so protective of their baby but not extend that concern to all babies.



There were no cradles then.



We had lots of work to do,
we didn't have time for lullabies.



Now women are free, they sing
lullabies and do anything they want.

Two elders offer their stories, contrasting the old and the new. Visual details offer additional thoughts: younger women present seem to express that they've heard this matriarch's opinions many times before.[1] [\[open notes in new window\]](#) The Adidas stocking cap seems an ironic touch for a speaker dismissive of the younger generation's mores.

Narrator (Serto) *How did you put your children to sleep?*

God put them to sleep, not us. We used to stroke them as we nursed them. I used to lay the baby here. I nursed it and patted its back. It was work time for us. We put them to sleep then go to get water. Work in the field, do the house chores....We couldn't sit for an hour to nurse them. We nursed them for half an hour, then got back to work. There were no cradles then. Now we rock them in cradles.

We had lots of work to do, we didn't have time for lullabies. Now women are free, they sing lullabies and do anything they want. We didn't have time. We used to sing lullabies and songs when we had time.



We leave it beneath a vine
and work.



We're workers,
we're suppressed people.

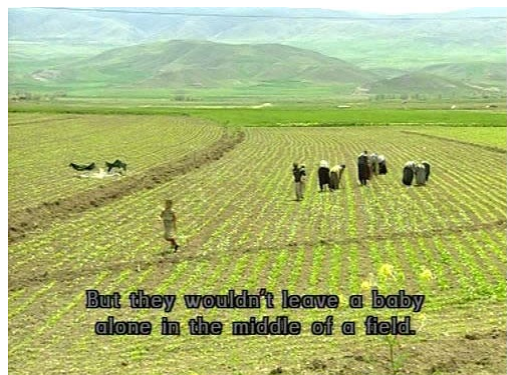


Bugs sing them lullabies,
dust and dirt fill their ears.

In a vineyard:

We can't sing lullabies. We go back to work in the field when the baby is 40 days old. We leave it behind a vine and work. We're

workers, we're suppressed people. I don't know how to sing a lullaby as a mother. You live in the city you are up until midnight and sleep late. We go to bed in the evening and get up at 4 or 5 in the morning. We have to prepare the lunch also the baby's diapers, etc. We leave the baby beneath a vine. If the boss is a kind man, he lets us take care of our babies. Otherwise, the baby cries there and you work to earn your living. Poverty is such a hard thing. Ants sing them lullabies in the morning. Bugs sing them lullabies, dust and dirt fill their ears.



But they wouldn't leave a baby alone in the middle of a field.



the noise of the hoes becomes his lullaby.



Narrator: Somewhere at the heart of Anatolia between Yozgat and Sivas, a small green tent in the middle of a field...could it be made to shelter food against the sun? Or is there a baby lying beneath it? But they wouldn't leave a baby alone in the middle of a field. When we come closer we see there's indeed a baby under it. It's name is Ahmet, Mehmet, Mustafa or Osman. This is how his life story has begun....As his cells multiply rapidly in deep sleep...the noise of the hoes becomes his lullaby. This lullaby will only end when the sugar beet is fully hoed. Or when the dowry is earned for the uncle.[2]

Spokesman (standing next to infant under a tent). We had a miserable life. He will have exactly the same life. We didn't have a choice.



-What's she having?
-Biscuits



This golden cradle in the Topkapi Palace.

Narrator. A few kilometers away there are two other babies....sleeping on the edge of a field under a tractor which gives the only shadow in the field. One is in a swing tied with ropes, the other in an iron cradle.

Narrator to young girl tending the baby:

What's she having?

Biscuits.

What else?

Boiled water

(girl makes soft rhythmic sounds)

Narrator. Cradles out of rags, cradles of rusty iron and cradles of solid gold.

This golden cradle in the Topkapi Palace inlaid with emeralds and rubies is a cradle for princes

Here is subversion in a different key. Women speak, they sing, in different voices, languages, and dialects. They are the authorities, operating in the practical, the everyday, the world. Of course this means listening, viewing, understanding in a different way: with an expanded and expansive analysis of what is political. That means attending to the local situation (the when and where), to contingency, and to seeing media as part of an historical process, itself in change, offering different possibilities through time.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes

Notes

1. This essay was first presented as a keynote address at the “Quiet Revolutions: Politically Subversive Cinema Conference” at San Francisco State University in October 2014. I want to thank the host students, who organized the annual event, especially Erin Weigand. Many useful comments there gave me additional thoughts which were then further framed by the events immediately following the grand jury report in late November 2014 on the Ferguson shooting as I was revising the essay. Special thanks as well to SFSU faculty Aaron Kerner and R. L. Rutsky. [[return to page 1](#)]

2. YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJt7gNi3Nr4>

Production details on Wikipedia:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/No_Church_in_the_Wild

Lyrics: <http://genius.com/Kanye-west-no-church-in-the-wild-lyrics>

3. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/No_Church_in_the_Wild

4. Four images with captions:





Images A. and B. While Kanye West sings, the accompanying images include a view from inside a police car as it is assaulted by the mob of protestors, and one-on-one attacks on the police line.

Audio, lyrics: *Coke on her black skin made a stripe like a zebra.
I call that jungle fever.*



Image C. Kanye continues as we see a protestor attack a mounted policeman with a pole, knocking the cop off his horse.

Audio, lyrics: *And deception is the only felony.
So never fuck nobody wit'out tellin' me.*



Image D. We see protestors push a police car, in flames, at the police line.

Audio, lyrics: *"Love is cursed by monogamy."*

5. <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Riot+Porn>
[[return to page 2](#)]

6. Of course it may actually be that they are the most vulnerable, easy pickings

for the police to boost their arrest statistics.

7. Here I'm working from simply "ferguson." You can refine the search with additional terms such as "protest," "riots," "police" (which brings forward many pro-police images), etc.

8. Even the street sign carries a political significance. Ferguson, a very small suburb within the great St. Louis metro area, like many area village sized communities with a white power structure and police force and a large and underrepresented black population, depends heavily on earning money off of traffic violations and thus has many exceptionally low speed limits designed to entrap inattentive motorists who pass from one suburb to another without noticing an abrupt change. This effectively supports lower property taxes for municipal services (advantaging whites) and combined with racial profiling in traffic stops, disadvantages African American residents and people passing through on the main streets. [[return to page 3](#)]

9. The first page on a Google image search provides refinements, including "police" which tends to provide more positive images of law enforcement, often implying they are protectors rather than menacers.

10. Given its years of development through different versions GTA has acquired a substantial critical literature analyzing it, as well as fanboy appreciations of the game. People unfamiliar with shooter video games might want to look at State of Emergency for Playstation (2002). A YouTube link for a game walk-through:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qifAvyl-IQI>

The game's premise is a small band of warriors must take on a dystopic future dictatorship by "The Corporation" by shooting their way through a shopping mall, etc. Anyone with images from the past decade of U.S. mass killings (perhaps most famously Columbine high school or the Aurora Colorado shopping mall at a screening of *The Dark Knight Rises*) could easily read the murderous events as a re-enactment of the videogame fiction.

11. Also pertinent here, the discussions of activist media in this issue of *Jump Cut*: Chris Robé, Angela Aguayo, Ernie Larsen. Richard Porton's *Film and the Anarchist Imagination* (NY: Verso, 1999) provides excellent background to anarchist aesthetics.

12. His book, *Bastards of Utopia: Living Radical Politics after Socialism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015) is forthcoming in Spring 2015. It accompanies his 2010 feature film done with Pacho Velez.

13. In a brief recent email exchange where I pointed at "No Church in the Wild," Razsa wondered how the fictional nature of the Jay Z and Kanye West video functioned given that his ethnographic subjects always viewed the work they were watching as "documentary." My own view is that the affective result (which is what his subjects value) is the same whether documentary or fiction. But I'd withhold final judgment until I can read the book length study and see the Razsa and Velez film.

14. I'm thinking here of a wide variety of work, much of which I admire, as represented by Jean-Marie Straub and Danielle Huillet, Haroun Farocki, Yvonne Rainer, Dan Eisenberg, Ernie Gehr, some of Godard's more documentary work, Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, and Trinh T. Minh-Ha.

15. A DVD is available from TRT's Market site:
http://www.trtmarket.net/?kategori_22_DVD_ler.html
Lullaby (Ninni) is DVD 52.

Full disclosure, she is a friend and former student. [[return to page 4](#)]

16. The film was made in 2003. Since then, major regional events have created new regional shifts, especially with the US Iraq War creating new configurations of Kurdish aspirations and autonomy. The Syrian civil war produced one million Syrian refugees in Turkey, and the rise of ISIS establishes a new imbalance.

17. Agriculture only amounts to about 8% of the national economy, but employs 25% of the total labor force.

Image notes

1. The speaker's native tongue is Arabic and women of her generation received hardly any formal education, so her remarks (in Turkish) are heavily accented. [[return to visual essay, page 4](#)]

2. This group of migrant workers come from Southeast Turkey and must travel to find work. In Spring they are involved in planting, in Fall harvesting. Marriages take place in August. The baby's actual uncle must earn enough money before August to have a wedding with his betrothed.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Images from Kanye West's
"No Church in the Wild":



Protester turns and faces police.



Police attack on horseback.



Police shoots at protesters.



Protesters launch at police line.

Activist street tapes and protest pornography: participatory media culture in the age of digital reproduction

by [Angela J. Aguayo](#)

"Democracy's dire, in-the-trenches presentation is a pepper spray to your cynicism."

—*San Francisco Examiner* about *This is What Democracy Looks Like* (2000)

A man stands with his back to a police barricade with an explosive in his hand, a Molotov cocktail. The only sound is the flick of a lighter that ignites the rag wick of the bomb as he turns to face the police. A medium shot of his torso captures the context of a chaotic street scene; there are angry homemade-weapon wielding protesters on one side and faceless militarized police forces on the other. The man launches the bomb into the police barricade, in slow motion the audience is encouraged to anticipate the raging fire that will emerge on impact. The following montage places the protesters and police in a direct clash, providing a close shot of an angry police dog, a reverse shot of masked protesters, back to baton wielding police, and a final reverse shot of protesters launching toward the police line. This is not a news report or activist video; these are images depicting multi-millionaire rap artist Kanye West in his 2012 video, "No Church in the Wild." The video features an aggressive protester, Kanye West, being glorified for violent street fighting. Images of protest, citizens clashing with police, and spectacular representations of battle in the city streets are not a new phenomenon. The pattern in which excessive, repetitive, and accentuated violence is mapped onto representations of protest across media culture is notable.

Contemporary images of protest circulate in a variety of unusual contexts; commercials, movies, online networks, news reports, and rap videos. The roots of protest images emerge from a less spectacular place. They can be found in the Worker's Film and Photo League's impulse to document strike lines in the 1930s, the video culture jamming of the guerilla television movement of the 70s, anti-nuclear proliferation and labor videos in the early 1980s, the AIDS activist video movement in the 1990s, and the street tapes from the anti-globalization protests that followed. The ways in which mainstream media frame political and social issues has been a site of scholarly inquiry, but too little attention has been paid to how the visual discourse of radical media—produced outside the forces of the market and the state—operates within public culture (Downing 2008: 42).

The purpose of this essay is to analyze the visual discourse of social movements

and protest images through contemporary street tapes. This includes an analysis of the participatory culture emerging around these works. Street tapes are moving image media—often edited quickly or in camera—that reflect remnants of undocumented history from the streets, often in conjunction with public events. These works attempt to construct media through the eyes of the common people rather than politically privileged, economic elites or media professionals that typically control the spin on public content. When cameras become inexpensive, mobile, cheap and easy to use, street tape culture tends to flourish. “Street videos” or “street tapes” have a history that far precedes the YouTube era; this form of video production initially emerged during the late-1960s to mid-1970s. The style evolved from the first inexpensive, lightweight, portable, hand-held moving image cameras (1/2 inch reel-to-reel Portapak) that were used to generate moving images of public life, in streets, living rooms, and churches. Video could now record where larger, more expensive, and cumbersome equipment could not be easily be used.

The feature-length documentary *This is What Democracy Looks Like* (Friedberg and Rowley, 2000) is an iconic film representing the street tape culture emerging around the anti-globalization movement at turn of the 21st century.[1][[open endnotes in new window](#)] A critical mass of activists from all over the world arrived in Seattle to protest the meeting of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in November 1999, marking one of the most significant instances of social protest in several decades. The street tapes from this event feature massive demonstrations and coalition building that took place over five days of political struggle. The footage shot by more than 100 different activists, patchwork video recordings vary in production value and are diverse in approaches to interviewing and framing. *This is What Democracy Looks Like* is comprised of street tapes that were initially streamed on the Internet or collected during the protest through the Independent Media Center, an experiment with organizing independent media production around massive demonstrations.

A loosely structured Independent Media Center (IMC) emerged in Seattle to provide technical and news media support for activists attempting to document the WTO protests. The IMC functioned as a clearinghouse for information and resources to help citizens create and share their own media (Phillips 2000). Throughout the week of demonstrations in Seattle, the IMC uploaded raw footage and news reports in real time on a self-publishing website, competing with the opposing news reports from mainstream television, newspapers, and radio news outlets. This marks a key shift in street tape culture because activist participatory media were keeping pace with the mainstream news cycle on a parallel broadcast network online, a circumstance that eluded previous generations of street tape activists.

The visual representations of political struggle in the *This is What Democracy Looks Like* street tapes depict a celebration of life in the streets of Seattle: puppets, street performers, drum circles, elaborate costumes representing wildlife, and free form dancing. There are also brief segments that explain the historical, contextual, and political issues at stake with globalization. Yet, the narrative arc of *This is What Democracy Looks Like* and the arresting moments of the video streaming out of the Indy Media Center during the protests were circulating, among other types of video, repetitive violent sequences and montages of police dominance. The street tapes bear witness to the police use of excessive violence and the protesters helpless against a well-equipped military unit. There are a number of scenes of protesters forcefully pinned down, thrown around, and beaten by police. In one powerful scene, a protester is pinned down by his neck against the street asphalt by a police officer’s knee as the protester screams:

“I am not struggling! I am peaceful!”

Images from *This is What Democracy Looks Like*:



Images of police contextualized with statistics about law enforcement.



Police perched on top of tanks, firing rubber bullets.



Police march in full riot gear.



Protester pinned down by police officer while screaming, "I am peaceful."



Police officer rips off gas mask of protester and sprays pepper spray at close range.

Other aggressive images include police ripping off gas masks and spraying fire pepper spray in protesters' faces at close range while sitting protesters are attacked with nightsticks. Some of the most affecting images are shot in the midst of tear gas and pepper spray as videographers attempt to run away from an aggressive and unrelenting police force in full riot gear. The camera framing virtually places the audience in harm's way, struggling to see through the tear gas. When protesters are recovering from pepper spray on the ground, the camera records them at eye level. The street level camera framing encourages the audience to enter into the protesters' space of disorientation, chaos, and confusion. It has been well documented that the Seattle protests hijacked the media agenda of the World Trade Organization meeting (Meikle 2002: 8). Who does the self documented street tape address? Are they geared toward audience(s) interested in globalization or are the street tapes about discourse happening in the margins, aimed toward the margins, speaking to those already in the know?

This essay advances a visual and ideological critique of alternative media frames found in street tapes that were produced from the WTO protests and provides an account of how these particular images circulate. In the final words of their essay, "From Public Sphere to Public Screen: Democracy, Activism, and the 'Violence' of Seattle," DeLuca and Peeples charge scholars with the importance of charting the topography of our new world and its omnipresent media environment of image combat, the "primal scene upon which culture is produced and enacted" (DeLuca and Peeples 2002: 132).

I will argue that the framing and structure of *This is What Democracy Looks Like* encourages a celebration of the image as disruption by fetishizing state violence. This form of visual discourse encourages collective identification with an abused citizen and has given rise to the distribution and reproduction of



Protesters scatter as police emerge from tear gas in the streets in riot gear.



At eye level, the audience experiences the aftermath of tear gas.



The camera framing is on the ground with activist, experiencing the confusion and chaos from the streets

what has been termed, “protest porn” or “riot porn” in activist circles.[2] Protest porn is one of many forms of street tape culture, focused on a particular framing of activist practices. It is a rights-based visual discourse, primarily but not exclusively focused on spectacular images of political agitation between the state and its citizens. The camera is used as a witness to unlawful acts perpetrated by authorities and as a mechanism to check the interests of the state. Beyond witnessing, these images depict a victimized citizen, immersed in a noisy, unpredictable, and dangerous democratic space. Images of intense battle in the streets are represented in successive repetition or edited together in montage with dramatic music and the violence becomes the climax of the narrative arc. Ironically, the content of protest porn cannot be ignored, the necessity to bear witness to aggressive police actions upon protesting citizens, especially as police forces in the United States and around the world have moved towards militarization in the last 20 years. It is necessary to record police abuse against citizens exercising their rights in the streets; I am suggesting that we interrogate the potential applications of those representations and how they are used for mobilization. This project is interested in how we order, use, reframe, deliver, and curate protest images from the margins.

This analysis of contemporary protest video will proceed in three stages: first, this essay will examine how contemporary images of protest and agitation align historically with street tape culture; second, this article will address *image events* and provide a framework for conceptualizing protest pornography and how it addresses particular audiences and circulates in a new media environment; and finally, the paper will advance a theoretical framework for understanding the street tapes as protest pornography.

Street tapes as a participatory media culture

The evolution of street video reporting began with the development of affordable, lightweight and portable analog recording equipment in the early 1970s.[3] Building community and democratizing access to production resources was the primary goal of early street tape culture:

“[G]uerrilla television was configured not as a weapon, but as a cultural tool bringing people together” (Boyle 1997: 30).

This movement of early video makers gave baby boomers access to the resources to make their own brand of television. For the generation that grew up in the shadows of the Civil Rights and antiwar movements, television was a critical way into understanding world events. The movement attempted to shift television’s content from placid entertainment and negative images of youthful protest toward a reflection of counter-cultural values. This new television reality was

“fueled by adolescent rebellion and utopian dreams, video promised an alternative to the slickly civilized, commercially corrupt, and aesthetically bankrupt world of [broadcast] television” (Boyle 1997: 4).

By giving people access to tools that allowed them to document their lives and negotiate the world on their own terms, the movement created a vernacular space that had the potential to counter the prevailing dominant ideology of broadcast television.

The character of street tapes is marked by amateur production quality—due to the technical deficiencies of video but also because the increased accessibility of technology enabled many more inexperienced users to make media—which produced a distinctly vernacular cinematic discourse. The unsteady and unpredictable form presented images that could be perceived as raw data in an uncertain world. The aesthetic was a part of the political statement that functioned to validate the form of street tapes as a kind of argument:

“The low quality, grainy, and shaky footage was usually black and white and unedited, which offered a new type of straight-from-the-scene authenticity that challenged the presumed objectivity of broadcast television” (Horsfield and Hilderbrand 2006: 8).

While broadcast television was sanitized, narrated, over produced, slick, and run by elites, street tape culture could define itself against the mainstream in form and content. The spontaneous, untrained, shaky footage is edited in a way that does not draw attention to the creative decisions that make street tapes partial and selective. Instead, audiences perceive they are viewing raw footage from which they can piece together a story about the events on the screen.

This style includes spontaneous interviews with people from diverse backgrounds, filmed on the streets, in workplaces, and in the community. For example, early videomakers like Tami Gold with New York Newsreel and Judy Hoffman shooting video for Kartemquin in Chicago were experimenting with recording in-camera video on strike lines. These videos were screened at bars and community centers, often on the same day as shooting, as a way to bring people to the campaign. Horsfield and Hilderbrand argue,

“Media activists saw handheld video equipment as a tool to document a new type of direct-from-the-scene reportage that was not manipulated, biased, or reshaped in any way to distort reality” (Horsfield and Hilderbrand 2006: 8).

Although street tapes are not free from the author’s decisions about framing, stopping and starting the camera, and placing shots next to each other, which are all a form of shaping reality. Many of the street tapes were designed as an interactive communication loop to contest the one-way communication model of mainstream media (Greenwald 2007:174). The People’s Video Theater in New York City was an alternative video journalism collective emphasizing political issues with videos such as *Liberation 1970*, *Vietnam*, and *The Abortion*. The collective recorded discussions in the street, inviting participants to watch the tape at a local “hardware station” or loft space outfitted with playback equipment. Post-screening discussions were also taped and once again played for participants.

The 80s brought Ronald Reagan and deep cuts in arts funding, fueling a new legion of video activists. Anti-nuclear proliferation activists took to the streets to record infrequently reported protests and demonstrations. In the late-1980s and early-1990s there were an increasing number of street tapes that depicted a societal transition in worker-management relations, a burgeoning critique of media conglomeration, and an impending health crisis (Halleck 2002). In this exploratory environment, more militant activist collectives began building on these trends. The explosion of the AIDS crisis in the late-1980s and early-1990s produced a new kind of participatory video culture and activist intervention. The AIDS activist video movement documented demonstrations, the struggle for visibility, and the evolution of the disease from the perspective of those

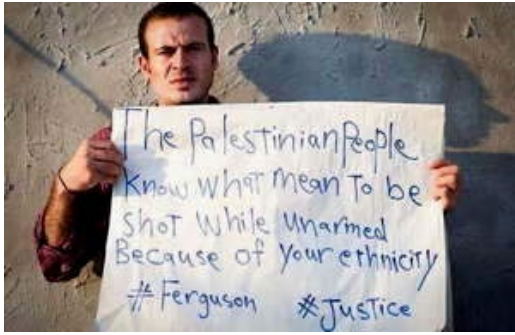


Image circulating on Twitter connecting Ferguson and the Palestinian struggle, an example of how solidarity is frequently communicated with street media.



An example of tweets from the people in Palestine giving advice about tear gas in Ferguson, image obtained from Twitter.

experiencing it. The videotexts functioned as a necessary and powerful counter-narrative to the absent or routinely negative depictions of AIDS in the mainstream media.[4] Historically, there is an oppositional condition built into the fabric of street tape culture. Like most radical media, street tapes are constructed in opposition to the professional practices of journalism or routine content and seek to transform those practices. Most activist video collectives that produce street tapes can be characterized by

“their attempts to free themselves from the power of government, the state and other dominant institutions and practices” (Atton 2004: 495).

The turn of the 21st century marked the beginning of a (re)evolution in the organizing of publics around mobile media production, working at the same speed as mainstream news networks. The WTO street tapes and *This is What Democracy Looks Like* emerge in a time before social media and reveal a participatory media culture transitioning away from analog production and distribution models and toward early experimentation with digital formats. The evolution of mobile technology in the late 1990s coincided with a massive political uprising in opposition to globalization and an increased reliance on online information for up-to-date, underground, asynchronous information. The revolutionary moment was that activist could by pass the filters of mainstream media with self-publishing. Jill Freidberg, co-director of *This is What Democracy Looks Like* notes,

“It was about sharing with the world an alternative version of what commercial media would not show.”

This was a significant moment for the culture as technology again became more compact, mobile, and inexpensive just as the Internet was becoming standardized with a growing user base while political conflict plentiful.

The street tapes that emerged from Seattle are ground breaking in terms of their function in radical media culture and limited in audience and diverse representation. The conditions were different in 1999, there were few online networks where sympathizing citizens could accidentally stumble upon street tapes and follow the events from afar. The call to bring cameras and other recording equipment to the protests in Seattle was actually circulated in a paper flier and placed in the local community a week before the demonstrations. The self-distribution and grassroots screenings of *This is What Democracy Looks Like* was widespread, circulating globally in grassroots activist circles and educational institutions, traveling around the world to conflict zones, on campuses, during political struggles in places like Oaxaca, impromptu community screenings on the side of buildings in Europe and around the world. Much of the contemporary impulse to document street activism emerges from the groundbreaking participatory media culture and street tapes produced from the WTO protests in Seattle.

In comparison to today, the street tape culture in Seattle was insular in terms of addressing an already committed public but widespread in that the audience was global. Today, street tapes emerge in a world with well-developed virtual connections and increased visibility through online networks that are aggregated to distribution this mode of information. The videos that emerged from the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and Anonymous exist in a very different context. For example, the street tape culture erupting from the uprising around the police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri almost instantly produced solidarity videos and images from all around the world. Protestors in Gaza were even sending Ferguson protesters tips on how to deal with tear gas. In contrast with the conditions around the street tapes in 1999, these new networks and technologies with inexpensive mobile image

production, emerge and disperse street tapes globally, synchronously and often before events unfold in the mainstream news.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Protest pornography

Images from *This is What Democracy Looks Like*:



Construction workers show solidarity from their job post.



Labor leader expressing heartbreak at the breakdown in democracy.

This is What Democracy Looks Like is a report film that primarily serves to inform people interested in the Seattle WTO protests and the events that occurred over five days. What is noticeably absent from this film is the usual collection of documentary authorities: politicians, professors, and media professionals. The various speakers interviewed in the film speak from a position of ordinary rank and file union people or respectable looking professionals, or regular folks who were eyewitnesses as well as participant-activists. The film represents activism as collaborative and diverse, bringing together different groups, strategies, and tactics including organized labor, environmentalists, students, workers, community activists, immigrants, representatives of the global South, and anti-imperialism activists. The most memorable, shocking and traumatic images of the documentary do not involve coalition building.

Some of the most affecting images in *This is What Democracy Looks Like* are shot in the midst of tear gas, placing the audience in harm's way, as the camera records the violence at eye level. Protest porn is about how we order, use, reframe, deliver and curate those violent images from the margins. Whether these images of protest included historical context or explanations is significant because, if mobilization is a concern, the framing of activist practices matter. It is important to investigate how street tape images function to encourage us to engage in collective identification to better understand the restorative justice potential of the genre.

The framing of *This What Democracy Looks Like* that is central to this analysis depicts a citizenry at war with aggressive state oppression and violence, marking a stark departure from previous incarnations of street tape culture in which citizens "gave their raps on tape" with protest activities in the background. Seattle marked a distinct shift from largely nonviolent interactions with police shown in earlier moments in street tape culture.[5][[open endotes in new window](#)] The street tape culture depicted in *This is What Democracy Looks Like* (re)introduced a representation of combat between police and protesters not seen since the civil rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s. The difference, however, was that the earlier protesters were passive, using traditional civil disobedience and avoiding combat. The video sequences of confrontation where police are dominating protesters in *This is What Democracy Looks Like* are frequent, compulsive, and potentially shocking to mass U.S. public culture. In these videos, civic participation in the form of direct action is depicted as noisy, brutal, and aggressive. For audiences not familiar with the role of policing in social movements (Della Porta and Tarrow 2005; Tilly 2004), these images may reinforce the idea that protest is violent and irrational. The images of violent political struggle captured in IMC street tape culture are not isolated; rather, they are similar to other street tapes emerging from protests against globalization circulating at the turn of this century.[6] The timing and release of these street tape images served to inform and recruit people to new anti-globalization, anti-neoliberalism, and anti-imperialism projects. That is, the target audience was intentionally wide but in practice, largely addressing people already sympathetic and in opposition to globalization.

In his book *Image Politics: The New Rhetoric of Environmental Activism*, Kevin DeLuca (1999) explores how new social movements use media in a world enveloped in image combat. He argues that *image events* are rhetorical tactics



Images of massive coalition building.



Intimate pictures of street battle, camera becomes part of the crowd.



Direct action depicted, as noisy, brutal and aggressive.

utilized by activists. They are recorded political actions that bring the combat of mediated agitation directed at a wider mass culture. The premise is that, through *image events*, political action goes through the camera and launches a “mind bomb” that explodes in the public’s consciousness, transforming the way people view their world. *Image events* are not a new phenomenon. For example, various groups have marched on Washington for decades, going all the way back to the WW1 Veterans Bonus March in the 1930s, the 1964 Civil Rights march, and the dozens of million people marches of today. All of the events were designed to present strong images through the media, showing strong popular sentiment in favor of some new course of action.

Using the discourse of environmental activists, DeLuca draws from Greenpeace’s early whaling campaigns and Earth First!’s tree sitting events as examples of *image events* that didn’t necessarily change legislation, politics, or the need for resources, but effectively contested social norms and transformed key discourses (59). He argues a different terrain for social change is being negotiated—with new conditions—in an omnipresent environment of onscreen image combat on television, cinema, and online. The more dramatic and controversial the *image event*, the more likely it may disrupt mass consciousness. DeLuca proposes that the success of an *image event* is not measured by whether it changes the world. Instead, *image events* are politically effective in attempting to reconstitute the identity of the collective culture by creating discomfort in the minds of the audience, causing a shift in mass consciousness. In our current world, this is accomplished through images that disrupt and shock. DeLuca’s theorizing is compelling in its effort to understand the terrain of image politics, social movements, and information/image circulation, especially at this particular historical moment in which self-documentation, including street tapes, has become a more central element of our culture.

Image events as theorized may identify a tactic. However, the concept is narrow and problematic, primarily understanding images as polarizing, ignoring the potential for images to function in a variety of rhetorical capacities, produce solidarity, increase membership, or inspire new ways of thinking. *Image events* as theorized by DeLuca are at once limited in their function to create a challenge to structural or institutional injustice but fantastical in their ability to penetrate mass consciousness. DeLuca easily concedes the idea that images can not function as more than disruption in this televisual context yet insists this disruption can alter mass consciousness. In the case of the WTO protests in Seattle, for example, the many *image events* reduce a complex set of issues around globalization to a rights-based visual discourse that functions to polarize viewer comfort and equilibrium—creating tension between images on the screen and belief in the government as a safe institution. But do these images enable political action or do they reinforce stereotypes of protesters as irrational agitators?

A conceptualization of *image events* may celebrate the image as disruption, but it should be open enough to explain a whole range of outcomes and possibilities. Without such rhetorical distinctions, *image events* may function as disruptive, but in whose interest? DeLuca is analyzing the culture of images and the power of self-documenting political resistance but primarily in relation to mainstream culture. Street tape culture offers a unique set of circumstances and possibilities



Police forcibly shove peaceful and nonviolent protesters.



Troopers charging marchers at the Pettus Bridge, Civil Rights Voting March in Selma, Alabama, March 7, 1965. Photo by Martin Spider.

Images from *This is What Democracy Looks Like*:



Images are framed from the perspective of being attacked.

for mobilization that extend beyond the televisual screen. My concern is that understanding images and social movements as the celebration of disruption encourages a media culture untethered from meaningful social change.

“Protest pornography” marks a particular representation and reading formation for street tapes that encourages a distinct cinematic gaze. Sexual pornography and street tapes share certain cultural characteristics; they belong in the margins as a lowbrow genre that pushes the bounds of social acceptability. The term *protest pornography* refers to media that encourages meditation on the emotional arousal provoked by violent and spectacular images of political resistance. Such images are epitomized by metaphorical shots of citizens in violent struggle with an uncontrollable government apparatus as the climax of the narrative arc, a point for repetition and/or montage. The framing of protest pornography is seductive; the presentation of non-sexual violence in such up close detail the aesthetic resembles pornography. The representations of violence exceed what is necessary to convey meaning and creates a forced choice between identification with an out of control government apparatus or the principled but physically abused citizen.

When the term porn is used to describe the gaze on other objects such as food, representation of poverty, or the images of battle, it is less about the apparent content and more about the nature of representation itself (Jones 2013: 4). Those who use the word “protest porn” want to make a different kind of media. The hope is for images that penetrate the veil of consumer capitalist culture to insert a kind of urgency for the audience to invest in grassroots democratic practice in opposition to systematic injustice. They are often a reflection on the most intense political struggles of our time and that I will address these issues more in the rest of the essay. I will analyze *This is what Democracy Looks Like* as a key work from the recent past that sets up these issues and ways of thinking about street tape culture.

During the 1960s, the nightly news mostly reported images of nonviolent protests with occasional police violence. Therefore, it is especially dramatic when police violence does happen on the televisual screen, when we see citizens being attacked by police with fire hoses or dogs. At the time, these civil rights images were often taken from a safe distance, giving the audience an up-close but outside look at the brutality. In more recent times, during the WTO protest, activists recorded violent acts of physical oppression but from inside the protest and from the perspective of those being attacked. Recording equipment is now mobile and compact. In these tapes we also see protesters fighting back and the beginnings of a highly militarized police force culture. Based on such images, *This is What Democracy Looks Like* encourages understanding the Seattle protests as a David and Goliath street fight.

In her article “Pornographies of Violence? Internet Spectatorship on Body Horror,” Sue Tait suggests that watching suffering without mobilizing sentiment to eradicate such suffering trains us to imagine ourselves as victims of violence as opposed to actors with agency to resist such oppression (Tait 2008: 105). Tait is looking at the participatory cultures surrounding graphic, self-documented images during the Iraq war, specifically online forums that exchange this media. As soldiers have entered battle with mobile recording equipment and easy access to uploading media online, an underground tape culture has emerged. Tait argues that watching non-fictional body horror on the screen, people in pain, transforms the suffering subject in trauma into imagery that stimulates, fascinates and repulses the viewer. There is a point at which watching suffering produces immobilization as we become desensitized to the images.

Unveiling the contradictions of neoliberal democracy



Police point guns down at protesters while standing on tank.



Police lined up and armed for battle with protesters.



Police hovers above protesters and blasts pepper spray directly in face at close range.

For decades social movements have used some form of radical news reporting as a strategy of promulgation—communication designed to bring citizens to a movement (Bowers et al 1993). The street tapes produced by the IMC include stirring images of troubling political struggle; absent is dialogue across difference that is the iconic marker of democratic practice in the streets of an advanced industrial nation. *This is What Democracy Looks Like* supplements street tape footage with interviews that reflect on the protest events. For example, an interview with Yalonda Sinde, an activist with the Community Coalition for Environmental Justice, is edited together with segments from the mainstream news media reporting on the WTO protesters, but in contrast to the news, she frames the police as violent and hostile. Sinde's interview is also juxtaposed against footage recorded by activists, providing evidence that the violence and hostility was actually perpetuated by the police. Characterizing the mainstream news frames as problematic, Sinde remarks:

“Here is a perfect example as to why we need to fight. Because this city got up in arms about them breaking Starbucks windows, you know what I mean? They [protesters] didn't go out and hurt somebody. Everyone, because the property, downtown Christmas shopping, was up in arms. To me that exemplifies we are fighting against Capitalism. And they [police] will go to any length to protect Capitalism.”

This segment poses a question about protest and violence to the audience, contributing to the rights-based visual discourse of the documentary. Armed with video cameras, many protesters congregated in the streets of Seattle, capturing images of peaceful protests, police brutality, reactions from bystanders in the streets, peaceful acts of civil disobedience, activist voices, and the evolution of events that resulted in repeated violent clashes between protesters and police. These scenes are powerfully edited together with street interviews.

The documentary primarily focuses on alarming images of what seems like a military operation in the streets of Seattle — protesters in the streets clashing with faceless police in full riot gear, who spray pepper spray, wield batons, and arrive on the scene in military tanks. Protesters in the streets range from kindergarten teachers to steel workers. As the four days pass in the documentary, the portrait of the average citizen in the streets becomes increasingly radicalized, having experienced solidarity with other protesters and violence by the police in the streets of Seattle.

The images used in *This is What Democracy Looks Like* function as counter-arguments to the prevailing mainstream media stories, using sensational images of state-sanctioned violence to depict an out-of-control police force acting aggressively on peaceful protesters. Most of the visual images of protesters depict activists' nonviolent, rational and cooperative actions. The street interviews reflect thoughtful citizens, earnest about fighting for a better future. In contrast, the police forces are dressed in full riot gear, the camera often panned upward so that the lunging line of faceless police are perched, ready for battle against unarmed citizens. This is experienced from the point of view of an activist on the ground, waiting for a physical altercation. Other images of violence perpetrated by police include attacking sitting protesters with nightsticks at the same time that tanks roll into the streets with police positioned on top, randomly shooting rubber bullets into the crowd.



Police ride into streets in military tanks, approaching sitting protesters .



Older woman inquires with police about violent conduct of law enforcement.



Orderly and peaceful protesters hold signs to stop the meeting of the World Trade Organization.



Protesters represented as thoughtful citizens, fighting for a better future.



Police loom over sitting protesters, ready to clear the streets.



Protesters embracing before impending arrest.



Concussion grenades and tear gas canisters launched into the crowd at close range.



Police search the crowd, through the tear gas with their guns mounted and ready.

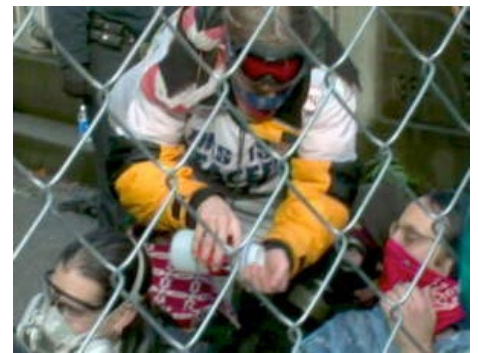
The camera framing virtually places the audience in harm's way, struggling to see through the tear gas. The chaos of billowing smoke fills the camera frame. The silhouette bodies emerging from the smoke step into frame, ominous music,

disharmonious cords capture the space of the streets in Seattle as an unfamiliar place, another world away. When protesters are recovering from pepper spray on the ground, the camera records them at eye level. The street level camera framing encourages the audience to enter into the protesters' space of disorientation, chaos, and confusion.

The street tape footage in *This is What Democracy Looks Like* produces a distinct vernacular visual discourse. It is unlike other moments in earlier street tape culture that foregrounded activist voices against the backdrop of protest such as Skip Bloomberg's *Nuclear Disarmament: A Video Survey* (1982) or Judy Hoffman's *What's Happening at Local 70* (1975). These moments exist in *This is What Democracy Looks Like* coupled with images that place the viewer in the street, dodging rubber bullets, adjusting to the surrounding chaos, and visually bound by the police-enforced barricades. This particular packaging of activist video frames radical ideas within the confines a rights-based visual discourse. The images may distill and transform the radical systematic critique of globalization into a visual discourse about the protest; and the recorded media becomes evidence of the state violating the free speech and assembly rights of its citizens. Although the meaning of this framing might speak to a broader political body, the violent visual images collide with normative ideological beliefs about sacred U.S. institutions such as the government, democracy, free speech, the civic function of the press, and the free market.



Police officer moves along through the tear-gassed streets.



Protesters experience confusion after tear gas launched at police.



The audience experiences the police enforced barricades.



Protesters expresses his only means of free speech while being arrested.



Police in full protective gear dragging off protesters for arrest.



Image of protester and layered with U.S. flag, design used for production title cards for *This is What Democracy Looks Like*.

Without a thorough understanding of these institutions as troubled, bankrupt, and potentially harmful to citizens at a structural level, the images may make it difficult for viewers to assimilate that disruption. Visual communication scholar Cara Finnegan argues that images function as enthymemes. That is, core persuasive elements of an image are found in the missing premise the audience fills in, often requiring reasoning in favor of the proposition offered by the image. In this case, the information necessary for the violent protest sequences to function as fuel for engagement is unclear. Efforts are made in the documentary to explain the negative impact of globalization, but little contextual history of the negotiation of free speech and assembly—that produced such visually arresting recordings of political resistance—is provided. The images assume the audience is well grounded in the legal and historical context of public protest and the struggle for public space. In fact, the most striking images of the documentary rely on that premise. This kind of cinematic construction of the protest documentary again reminds us that the targeted audience of address for these street tapes consists of those already sympathetic to the cause or networked within the activist communities circulating this discourse. The choice of focusing on violence as the climax and narrative arc of *This is What Democracy Looks Like* has consequence. The complexities of globalization and the global justice movement are distilled into polarizing images of a spectacular street brawl, an *image event*.

Celebration of image as disruption

DeLuca proposes that we live in new world in which images are the weapons of political struggle and the media are the space where power is negotiated. This contemporary media environment is characterized by

“1) private ownership/monopoly of the public screen, 2) infotainment conventions that filter what counts as news, and 3) the need to communicate in the discourse of images” (DeLuca and Peeples 2002: 136).

His version of the televisual public sphere attempts to rehabilitate much of the rich and turbulent sense-making process ignored by the normative ideal of procedural rationality central to the Habermasian concept of the public sphere. He finds value in celebrating the moment of image combat and disruption as an accomplishment. In this vein, DeLuca and Peeples consider the images deployed in mainstream media about the events around the Seattle WTO protests successful. They write,

“the symbolic violence and the uncivil disobedience fulfilled the function of gaining the attention of the distracted [mainstream] media” (DeLuca and Peeples 2002: 144).

There is a kind of parallel logic between the concepts of *image events* and protest

porn.

Protest porn happens when street fighting becomes the dominant premise. It sets up a reading pattern of moving images from protests, with focus on the violent bits, the money shots, and other forms of aggressive visual stimulus. Pepper spray in the face, rubber bullets at close range, protesters tightly bound and dragged off to arrest, baton wielding police are the kinds of images that function as the climax of battle. The pornographic framing emerges in the intense close-up images of battle, represented in repetition or edited together in montage with dramatic music where the violence becomes the tension and climax of the narrative arc. Protest porn is about how we order, use, reframe, deliver, and curate the violent images from the margins. In radical media, the framing of protest pornography is a matter of degree. The context provided for these images has bearing on how we understand them, but it still remains unclear if the polarizing effects of protest porn are productive. The complexities and ambiguities of larger political struggles at hand—globalization, racism, and capitalism—are backgrounded in film as a consequence of protest porn. The dull days of organizing in between direct actions that often includes many more hours of labor, deliberation and calm presence are also ignored.



Tear gas obscures battle in the streets.

Social movement images—circulated in service of social change—should not be celebrated for their ability to simply polarize as hailed by Delcua and Peebles. Careful consideration should be taken so as to account for images, their intended audience and the real function of their circulation, even if they are intended to disrupt the social order. *Image events* are dense surfaces meant to provoke but the filmmaker must judge whether or not the provocation inherent to the image might contribute to social change.

Protest porn is a tendency in street tape culture, not the rule. Filmmakers use these strategies in varying degrees, intentionally or by impulse. The question is less about whether something is or is not protest porn. Rather, we must ask, what does framing of violent protest do in the context in which it exists? Additionally, how does framing of protest porn function to serve the larger interests of the struggle at hand?

To take a recent example, perhaps the street tapes of clashes between police and the citizens of Ferguson, MO, after the shooting of an unarmed teenager Michael Brown helped spark a national dialogue about the militarization of the police. The street tape culture emerging out of Ferguson is incredibly complex, including the work of hacktivist group Anonymous, who threatened action against Ferguson police if protesters experienced violence. The image of Ferguson protesters clashing with police, captured on cell phones and circulated immediately through social media was accompanied by a real threat by this hacktivist group; to release police records and personal information and embarrass authorities. Protestors are speaking to each other across global context in the matter of seconds through social networks already in place.

In contrast, *This is What Democracy Looks Like* did not exist in a world where street tapes were networked in a complex system picked up by major news networks and easily archived and circulated to global activists, where images of protest function to broadly disseminate information as events unfold. While the images of protest in *This is What Democracy Looks Like* deal in diversity by representing people from all walks of life, the street tape culture at the time was rather insular. Historically, the WTO images of protest in *This is What Democracy Looks Like* significantly influenced a generation of self-documented protest images, setting a kind of iconic tone for what will soon become two decades of increasingly militarized police force and the corresponding clashes with citizens in the streets.

It is important to note that creative control over these representations of protest happen on two levels; the initial recording of the event and the editing of such

material. In our digital world these two creative tasks of interpretation and representation are not necessarily performed by the same person or created with the same intention. In TWDLL, the representations of protest are carried out collectively, as the documentary content was comprised of video recorded by over 100 activist and assembled by two directors putting images into context with extensive community feedback during the completion of the film.

Fetishizing state violence

Documentary texts in particular have been characterized in the media by activists and bloggers as sometimes encouraging a troubling visual meditation. Wildlife porn,[7] nuclear-test porn,[8] and war porn[9] are examples of the kinds of documentary framing that facilitate the arousal of the moving image. Tait argues that genres of pornographic framing and fetishizing violence share a commonality in acting upon the viewer's body:

“As distinct from the pleasure of pornographic spectatorship, the horror viewers' pleasure is of a different order to sexual arousal. Arousal derives from fear, terror, shock, and repulsion; it is experienced as both pleasure and displeasure” (Tait, 2008: 102).

It is not uncommon for the metaphor of pornography to be associated with media texts that encourage the audience to have an erotic relationship with the image.



Police arrive on horseback.



Protesters holding hands up while being physically removed by armed police.



Police dominate over protesters.

In her book *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Linda Williams, 1999), Williams argues that pornographic images of sex rhetorically function in a particular manner, producing technological and social ways of seeing. These technological ways of seeing are similar to the practices of looking encouraged by protest porn. The co-director of *This is What Democracy Looks Like*, Jill Friedberg explains,

"I definitely think protest porn is a real phenomenon...what turns porn into erotica or storytelling is context. Protest footage with no context, that is smack down for the sake of smack down, is potentially detrimental because it lacks context and easily miss interpreted and the potential to desensitize which is what I think has happened anyway...One of the experiences we were all having in 1999 is we, the people, were really shocked to see Robo cops, to see storm troopers in the streets. These big friggen guns for launching tear gas canisters and concussions grenades. And now, people expect to see that at a little protest."

Some of these highly militarized images were coupled with riot gear clad police on horseback, looming over the crowd. The collective imaginary provided by the images in *This is What Democracy Looks Like* is framed from the street activist perspective, looking up to the world in hope, only to be met with a smack down. After all, moving image pornography is grounded in the quest for uncovering unseeable truths of bodily motion. As Laura Mulvey pointed out, there are circumstances where looking itself is a source of pleasure. It is the pleasure of the look that gets transferred to other things by analogy, especially with the media screen (1975: 835). This practice of looking facilitated by protest porn is a meditation on the arousal, focused on the stimulating moments of resistance and, of course, iconic images of violent bodily struggle with an uncontrollable government apparatus.

In his work on horror porn, Steve Jones addresses the somewhat problematic but pervasive use of porn as a metaphor for understanding visual representations outside the sexual context. He argues that the use of porn as a metaphor is shorthand for offensive and distasteful, dismissing the value of what porn illuminates in this metaphorical connection. I would argue instead that pornography as a reading formation opens up a framework for understanding the arousal of the image. The images on the on the screen, the

"body-horror taps into the worst of our cultural fears" (189).

In the case of protest pornography, the illusions of bodily security and the dire threat to democratic process are exposed. It may be that protest porn is a way of working through the trauma of bodily violence in the streets through surviving the horror of battle.

Sadomasochistic (BDSM) pornography in particular uses narratives of power and arousal; an existing cultural framing that portrays domination and submission. These narrative tropes include prolonged scenes of bondage and discipline, dramatized suffering, a focus on binding and torture, the introduction of weapons, and ritualized forms of violence and domination. The properties of representing power in BDSM pornography parallel the iconic images of street tapes emerging in Seattle, producing a similar cinematic language domination and submission. What is essential here is this a similar desire to inflict and receive domination but unlike in sadomasochistic pornography, in conflict zones there is little value in consent.

The form of oppression crafted in the street tapes follows a basic dominant vs. submissive framework; that framework presumably helps distill a sense of a complicated and complex political struggle about globalization. The predominant



Hero shot of protester.



Police physically intimidate protester.

framing projects citizens as victims being dominated by the state. These moments are punctuated with non-diegetic sound editing that employs stirring music to signal an important narrative arc in the story. The audience is encouraged to experience this characterization, invited to take the subject position of being physically dominated while having speech and assembly rights violated. The protesters have a kind of limited agency in this framework, principled but beaten.

Documentary texts that encourage a pornographic metaphorical reading pattern are nevertheless editing the sensory material into a film in different ways. This pattern may emerge differently depending on the topic and context. For example, many critics call documentary works that focus on the daily life patterns of animals at the cost of ignoring the human impact on the environment, a form of wildlife porn. In this context, the good bits could be the routine battle scenes between animals or feeding patterns, represented in successive repetition or edited together in montage with dramatic music. With protest pornography, the complexities and ambiguities of life, the dull stuff in between the protest action; organizing, planning, and waiting are ignored and backgrounded. The metaphorical reading pattern of pornography deals in an illusion; it offers escape from the totality of reality by substituting the pleasure of repetitive consumption of stimulating visual elements as stand-ins for a complex world. The repetitive consumption exceeds what is necessary to convey meaning. As a consequence, this framing supplants the issues that are of most concern to those engaging in the streets.

In activist street tape culture, and protest pornography specifically, video cameras are used as instruments of political struggle to reconfigure relations between the state and its citizens. The participatory media culture surrounding contemporary street tapes serves an important protective function for activists who experience violent police action for exercising their democratic rights in mass demonstrations.[10] In fact, the presence of cameras in these instances may serve an important security function for unarmed activists in the streets. From Rodney King to the present, allegations of police brutality have circulated with much more rhetorical force with the help of video evidence. The use of cameras as instruments of political struggle partly means allowing activists and the public to monitor abuses by police and other regulatory forces.

However, the security function of activist video recordings are tenuous. Cases like the death of Eric Garner in Staten Island who was choked to death by police on tape, challenge street tape evidence, especially when a grand jury later decides not to indict the offending officer. Despite the lack of any legal justice prompted by the recording of Mr. Garner's death, there is an undeniable impact to this documentation in public culture. The video provides the evidence for a counter-narrative to challenge police authority and gain presumption. Capturing the last moments of his life at the hands of police, the video records the faint pleas of Mr. Garner's final sentence; I can't breathe, repeated 11 times. In the days that followed, protesters around the world marched in the streets carrying signs, wearing shirts, and projecting chats that immortalized Mr. Garner's last words.

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The circulation of protest pornography

Activist street tapes differ from other participatory media subcultures such as fan culture, which is centered squarely inside a commercial milieu that is industrial, mass produced, and created for a broad audience of online viewers. In the 1990s, for example, activist street tapes circulated within a fairly small and unknown network of alternative media websites on the fringes of the mainstream. At that time, street tapes were also available for purchase on DVD in spaces of leftist cultural production and often screened in non-traditional spaces (bookstores, university campuses, infoshops, [10][[open endnotes in new window](#)] community centers, parks, the sides of buildings, and living rooms). The circulation of street tapes was minimal, yet to stumble upon these works was often to become a part of a particular activist culture. As Michael Warner suggests about emerging publics:

“To address a public or to think of oneself as belonging to a public is to be a certain kind of person, is to inhabit a certain kind of social world, to have at one’s disposal certain media and genres, to be motivated by certain normative horizons, and to speak within certain language ideology” (Warner 2002: 10).

The cinematic language and the rights based visual discourse as well as the social world that these tapes uncover within the text do not reflect a discourse of promulgation—bringing outsiders into a movement. Rather, at this moment, the street tapes function as a kind of internal discourse.

Street tapes have a conflicting relation to mass culture, mostly constructed oppositionally to the mainstream but with participatory production practice that sought to bring people together. Early street tape culture was based on a hope for the potential of this kind of media to bring people together, to help speak across difference and potentially restore justice. Social movement media have been historically concerned with addressing “ordinary” people, creating media that seeks to reveal and mobilize (Atton “Internet” 2004). Since social movements often have to tap into widely known cultural codes to address a larger culture, it is problematic that the most pronounced images emerging from the anti-globalization movement, those now part of the historical archive, reduce the massive coalition building of this era to a street brawl.

In the decade after Seattle, protest pornography is a growing form and culture among radical activists, facilitated by the easy exchange of images in an online media environment and aided by the growth and personalization of online communication in the form of social media as well as lightweight mobile recording equipment. In a way that Michael Warner suggests, publics are created through the circulation of discourse; publics enable

“reflexivity in the circulation of texts among strangers who become, by virtue of their reflexively circulating discourse, a

social entity” (Warner 2002: 11-12).

Several blogs have emerged specifically to circulate images of violent political resistance. Online public spaces such as Riot Porn,[12] Peace Love Petrolbombs,[13] Bombs and Shields,[14] and Our War[15] have emerged as clearinghouses for the merging of radical politics and images of physical resistance in the streets.

The Riot Porn blog, in particular, is widely referenced as a public space for sharing and commenting on these images as a genre. This website embraces a broad definition of riot pornography that includes direct action but also includes other visual images of public rioting, such as riots that occur after sporting events. This blog includes links to additional information such as Google Riot Newswire, Yahoo Riot Audio and Video, and Riot Videos on YouTube.

It appears that the street tapes from the WTO protests were framed for, and circulated within, the community that produced them. However, these images also found an audience in activist communities online and some film festivals. For example, the Lost Film Festival, which has traveled the globe since 1999, is an interactive experience programming storytelling with short films. One of the video short genres is

“hot amateur protest footage from around the world appropriately called Riot Porn by the festival organizers.”[16]

Conclusion

The visual discourse of Kanye West’s video, “No Church in the Wild” indicates that protest images are a discourse of power, appropriated for use across media culture, using the form and content of alternative media as a visual template to convey anti-authoritarian political ideology or a kind of street authenticity. The discourse is referential, as the images in the video were recreated from some of the typical framing and content of protest street tapes. The framing of police, the hero shot of activists, and images of battle are hauntingly similar. The address of street tape may be narrow, speaking to those already in the know. However, the discourse it has set in motion, how it circulates and reproduces, is a powerful trope throughout public culture. In this way, the stakes of representation are considerable, the images’ social movements communicate reverberate profoundly in our cultural understanding of democratic practice and direct action.

The IMC’s involvement with a growing global justice movement created a unique opportunity to mobilize diverse activist groups and generate solidarity around critical media issues (Anon 2001). Street tapes, at their core, are a response to the politics of unfair representation of ideas, people, circumstances, and events in the mainstream media. The essential value of radical media lies in its ability to expose power, often at the cost of delivering hard news (Atton 2002a: 29). Because the violation of free speech and assembly rights in Seattle 1999 were unexpected in terms of the degree of physical force exerted by police, the event’s original focus on globalization — the reasons that brought protesters to the streets — waned in comparison.

While the Independent Media Center has organized counter-publics in unforeseen and potentially radical ways, street tapes could be self-published and broadcast to a global community. Because of the rapid pace of production — sometimes instantly — there is little time in the moment to



The framing of protest is referential. Horsed police attack protesters in street. Image from Kanye West’s “No Church in the Wild” on left, image from *This is What Democracy Looks Like* on right.



The framing of protest is referential. Police force dominates in streets. Image from Kanye West’s “No Church in the Wild” on left, image from *This is What Democracy Looks Like* on right.



The framing of protest is referential. Protester prepares for battle. Image from Kanye West’s “No Church in the Wild” on left. Image from *This is What Democracy Looks Like* on right.



Four police arrest one protester. Image from *This is What Democracy Looks Like*.



Youth leader discusses the possibilities of solidarity with the crowd.

consider the restorative potential of the images that are circulated. Many of the street videos streaming on the Indy Media website during the protest include representations of protest as recurring acts of police domination with little context. *This is What Democracy Looks Like* does provide some context, although unclear how that mitigates the use of protest porn strategies within the text.

The visual discourse of protest porn is not good or bad. But it has become a recognized visual style challenging for the goals of mass visibility and the process of social change. The images of protest pornography may aid understanding direct action as violent spectacle that comes with a tremendous threat to physical safety, while trading off articulating the process of globalization that brings people to the streets. The collision between visual discourse and social movements is most productively examined for how the images function in the process of social change and in whose interest. Visual disruption as polarization is one mode of street tape culture—with many other possibilities. It is the persuasive undercurrents in the visual discourse of protest pornography that could be interrogated by activist practitioners. We need to open a space for (re)imagining street tapes that speak to a larger culture in terms of representing and encouraging a participatory impulse, to explore options with framing as to avoid desensitization, and to consider multiple audience reactions while still bearing witness to the violation of rights and police brutality which citizens often experience by exercising the basic acts of democracy.

The street tapes that emerged post-Seattle from movements across the world, from the Arab Spring to Occupy Wall Street and in the aftermath of the police killings of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO and Eric Garner in Staten Island, this form of media has emerged as a formidable aspect of democratic culture globally, at the turn of the 21st century. In the last 15 years, the activist impulse has been similar in these street tape cultures in spite of strikingly different political, historical and technological circumstances. Fifteen years after the WTO protests in Seattle, activists with cell phones begin to prove how unimportant that mainstream news screen becomes as the traditional models of journalism begins to buckle under the weight of digital media innovation and online citizen journalism. In 1999, however, there was not any clear way around the mainstream news screen. Then activists were taking control in regards to media representation of the protests by creating their own rapid-pace media and documenting the world from their own perspective. Documenting the street life of protest was a tremendous act of resistance. Now it is time to assess the content of street tape culture, the patterns of representation, and the conventions of media circulation to better understand the impact and effectiveness of these works contributing to furthering democratic life.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes

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1. *WTO: Showdown in Seattle* was the first documentary released by the IMC. It carefully chronicles the protest in Seattle, paying close attention to contextualizing events within historical and legal frameworks.

This is What Democracy Looks Like (This is What Democracy Looks Like) is a more slickly packaged and widely circulated documentary that chronicles the protest in Seattle with little historical, legal, or social context. [[return to text](#)]

2. I was first introduced to the term “protest porn” at a public meeting during the 2004 Independent Media Conference in Austin, TX. The discussion focused on the types of images produced through the IMC and their potential implications for democracy.

3. Although there were previous historical moments when activism was linked with documentary film, the contemporary activist video movement began in the early 1970s. For example, documentary film as a derivative of news reporting began with the development of the periodic newsreel in 1910. After the Bolshevik revolution in 1917, Dziga Vertov headed the development of “Film Weekly” in Russia. This was a series of newsreels that captured a world at war (Barnouw 52). During the depression in the United States, the Workers Film and Photo League documented events such as strikes, elections, and foreclosures. Their newsreels were edited into small segments organized by events and news developments that functioned to capture the changes of a chaotic political world (111-112).

4. During this time, ACT UP, a prominent gay activist group, created a video collective called DIVA TV (Damned Interfering Video Activist Television). Gregg Bordowitz, a DIVA TV member, produced some of the most influential work in AIDS activist video, including *Voices from the Front* (Elgear, Hutt and Meieran, 1992) and *Fast Trip, Long Drop* (Bordowitz, 1995). The videos present stirring portraits of the political struggle over the AIDS crisis in both the public sphere and intimate close-up as Bordowitz struggles with the effects of the disease on his body. As reported in the *New York Times* ten years later, much of the work produced by the movement is “emotionally searing, since so many of the demonstrators and the creators of these videos

were fighting for their lives in a race against time” (Holden). Like much of the video activist work that preceded the AIDS documentary movement, “The videomakers clearly positioned themselves in opposition to an unresponsive and often antagonistic government and mainstream media” (Hubbard).

5. Although, recent representations of activism that involve clashes between police and protesters begin to percolate and show up in the AIDS activist video movement. [[return to page 2](#)]

6. These works include *We Interrupt This Empire*, a collaborative work by many of the Bay Area's independent video activists that documents the direct actions that shut down the financial district of San Francisco in the weeks following the United States invasion of Iraq.

7. BBC Radio 4 ‘Today programme,’ 4 March 2006, Dr. Paul Toyne argues that wildlife porn is the gaze upon the planet’s most amazing wildlife without mention of the human-caused environmental threats that concern the planet. Therefore, wildlife porn is the framing of nature documentary that encourages the audience to feel good gazing upon the environment without triggering their consciousness in relation to their everyday actions and responsibilities towards the environment.

8. For a reading on how the U.S. government’s nuclear test films celebrate the recording of explosions as a grand scientific endeavor rather than political posturing, see Mielke (2005).

9. For discussions on the use of pornography to describe images that trivialize and distract from the key issues of war in exchange for an erotic gaze on violence, see Baudrillard (2005), Brookes (2003), and Chuckman (2005).

10. Activist groups like *i witness* in New York organize around using video to protect the civil liberties of citizens engaging in direct action. The collective monitors police conduct at First Amendment events with video cameras and has been successful at uncovering perjury abuse by police officers, revealed illegal surveillance and exposed lies in official police statements. [[return to page 3](#)]

11. Infoshops are storefronts to distribute political, arts and sub-culture information. These spaces also serve as a hub and meeting space for activist groups.

12. <http://riotporn.blogspot.com/>

13. <http://molotovlove.blogspot.com/>

14. <http://bombsandshields.blogspot.com/>

15. <http://www.ourwar.org>

16. <http://64.233.167.104/search?q=cache:66aa3G-bBu8J:nyprotest.flactivist.org/index.php%3Fpaged%3D2+riot+porn&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=19&gl=us&client=safari>

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Anarchist aesthetics and U.S. video activism

by [Chris Robé](#)



Viral footage of a cop pepper-spraying students at UC-Davis on November 18, 2011. The image encapsulates the university's general disregard of student concerns regarding tuition hikes and an unresponsive bureaucracy of administrators.



A viral video of Chilean students dancing to Michael Jackson's *Thriller* in front of La Moneda presidential palace on June 2011 protesting the death of free public education.

A proliferation of activist videos goes viral over the Internet:

- a Ferguson, Missouri police officer threatens to kill protestors;
- Quebec students flood the streets in protest over tuition hikes;
- Chilean students dance to Michael Jackson's *Thriller* in demand for a free education;
- Asmaa Mafhouz incites Egyptians to protest in Tahir Square from her Facebook video blog;
- a cop indiscriminately pepper sprays University of California-Davis protesting students;
- another cop executes Oscar Grant in public view on a BART platform.

This increase of such videos signals a flourishing of independent activist media within the last ten years. But its origins stretch back to the late 1960s when digital technology like the Sony Portapak became available to Western consumers, making the earliest inroads in the United States.

Nowadays, almost all cellphones contain video capabilities that can transform most passersby into a de facto videographer of the moment. Additionally, as the costs of video cameras, editing software, and computers have decreased, new distribution platforms like Vimeo, Indymedia, YouTube, and Reelhouse have blossomed, allowing any uploaded video potentially to go viral almost instantaneously.

Yet, as I will show, serious structural inequities nonetheless remain with the growing accessibility of digital technology.

As video has been incorporated more and more into contemporary U.S. activism, two predominant trends emerge:

- Video does not simply represent collective actions and events, but also serves as a form of activist practice in-and-of-itself both at the moment of recording and during its later distribution and exhibition.
- Anarchist-inflected practices increasingly structure this type of video activism.

The first point is not unique to video. Lenin, for example, in "Where to Begin" described newspaper production as crucial in galvanizing collective action and sustaining solidarity during political lulls. Similarly, Sergei Eisenstein emphasized cinema's materialist dimensions when he described it as "a tractor plowing over the audience's psyche in a particular class



August 2014 viral footage of a Ferguson, Missouri police officer who threatens to kill protestors, exposing the police state and a siege mentality at work in the heartland.



2009 viral video capturing the execution of Oscar Grant by BART police officer Johannes Mehserle. It provides just one link in a long line of videotaped racist police actions towards African Americans from the infamous Rodney King beating of 1991 to more recent racism of Ferguson, Missouri police.



context.”[1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] The rise of relatively affordable and more compact video technology, however, has increased its ability to be integrated into activist practices in ways that film and other media before it could not.

Similarly, informal structures have often guided activist film productions of the past. But throughout the 1960s and onwards, accompanying the rise of digital technology, was a growing disillusionment by some on the Left with hierarchical organizational structures. This unease accelerated anarchist-inflected practices among much movement-based video activism. The convergence of digital technology into cellphones and handheld devices allowed smaller groups to produce such works and transfer skills among its participants. Although serious socio-economic limits still have curtailed actual equal access to video production for disenfranchised people, the technology’s expanded availability and portability have nonetheless enlarged its potential use by everyday people tenfold compared to previous use of 16mm and 8mm filmmaking.

The rise of video activism has been fairly well documented and discussed by its practitioners over Indymedia, IndieWire, and other discussion boards. Writers like Alexandra Juhasz, Deirdre Boyle, Dorothy Kidd, and Clemencia Rodriguez have further chronicled part of its history.[2] Archives and distributors like Video Data Bank, the Guerrilla TV Archive at New York University, Women Make Movies, Icarus Films, California Newsreel, Third World Newsreel, and Frameline have made some of these works available to screen.

Of political importance but less discussed are the historical connections between these video activist projects and the longer ranger goals of the movements in which they participate within. It is important for scholars and critics to explore the larger context of video activism, not just by analyzing its final products but also by studying the activist and media-making practices that make such work possible. As David James cautions, the aesthetic vocabulary of any work “is never merely itself; rather it is the trace of the social processes that constitute a practice.”[3] Image quality, for example, in general improves as video activists gain access to more high definition cameras, which is largely dependent upon the amount of resources these activists have at their disposal. As a result, the works produced by video activists belonging to historically disenfranchised populations generally tend to have lower image quality due to their media-makers resource deprivation while the works produced by more privileged activist media-makers have higher image quality due to a certain level of cultural and economic resources at their makers’ disposal, which we will see occurring during Occupy Wall Street (OWS).

Therefore, the politically concerned critic must examine how certain practices foster and limit the type of aesthetic vision made possible. This essay stresses the limits and possibilities that U.S. anarchist-inflected video



Sergei Eisenstein's *Strike* (1925). This famous slaughter sequence exemplifies Eisenstein's materialist stance towards film as "a tractor

activism yields. In particular, I explore how such activism while seriously challenging many injustices in its quest for a more equitable world also complements certain neoliberal practices that re-inscribe racial, gendered, and class privileges that this activism ostensibly intends to reject. Analyzing this inherent contradiction does not discredit the type of video activism taking place, but instead identifies the difficulties that accompany all types of media activism located in a deeply exploitative and hierarchical world.

Also, for many activists, video production does not serve as an endpoint unto itself but as a means to further build coalitions and galvanize collective action. The *process* of videomaking often equals the value of the final product. For example, many groups use video as counter-surveillance to capture inappropriate police behavior during demonstrations to be used later during court proceedings. There is also a hope that the presence of cameras might deter police misbehavior at the moment of filming. Often times, any collective, longer length video produced afterwards was a byproduct of more primary concerns with protecting demonstrators at the moment of the action. As a result, we need to temper any over-valorization of the videos in our analysis by also highlighting the practices that they emerge from.

This essay offers a brief historical sketch of some of the anarchist-inflected practices that have contributed to U.S. video activism. The first section argues that the rise of anarchist affinities during the late twentieth-century marks an important historical development in understanding contemporary video activism. I quickly chronicle the emergence of such affinities within various activist communities from the 1960s to the present and highlight some of the contradictions that plagued the video guerrilla scene arising in New York City during the early 1970s since they continue to haunt later U.S. video activism.

The next section shows how couching media activism within the frame of anarchist affinities can assist our comprehension of AIDS video activism and its relation to other media collectives such as Paper Tiger Television (PTTV). By focusing on the direct-action videos of ACT UP/NY we can see how the groundwork laid by the video guerrillas allowed such work to flourish as well as impose similar limitations. The final section addresses how the prism of anarchist affinities and network formations offer insights into recent developments of activist videomakers such as that of Brandon Jourdan and the videos produced by Occupy Wall Street. Also, by revealing moments of homologies between such video activism and neoliberal practices, we can see how this activism at times replicates some of the inequities it attempts to fight. Focusing on anarchist-inflected video-activist practices allows one to better trace the consistent possibilities and limits that such video activism has produced since its emergence during the late 1960s.

The rise of late twentieth-century U.S. anarchism

Before I delve into the anarchist affinities of U.S. video activism, I offer a few caveats about how I am defining them. One, like any "ism," anarchism has many varying strains. *Anarcho-syndicalism* strongly allies itself with a socialist position whereas *anarcho-primitivism* tends to be critical of socialism and civilization as a whole. Writers like Hakim Bey and

plowing over the audience's psyche." Through a sophisticated use of montage Eisenstein relates both intellectually and emotionally the slaughter of the proletariat by capitalists and the police.

collectives like CrimethInc. subscribe to more Romantic visions of anarchism that tend to over-valorize individual agency as leading to systemic resistance. Others like the Turbulence Collective and The Free Association advocate more post-structuralist positions that highlight the theoretical links between such theorists like Michel Foucault, Giles Deleuze, Antonio Negri, and the like with anarchist practices and contexts.

Despite these differences, collectives and individuals who share anarchist affinities tend to uphold three tenets:

- consensus-based decision-making,
- nonhierarchical structures, and
- direct-action tactics.

Although in reality new power imbalances might form and consensus might not be achieved, aspirations towards these more egalitarian structures and participants' direct involvement remain constant goals. As Uri Gordon proposes,

"Such an approach promotes anarchy as culture, as a lived reality that pops up everywhere in new guises, adapts to different cultural climates, and should be extended and developed experimentally for its own sake, whether or not we believe it can become, in some sense, the prevailing mode of society."[4]

Anarchist affinities, in other words, are pre-figurative attempts to actualize the world we desire in the present and to reject the notion that the political ends are more important than its means.

John Downing noted similar anarchist-inflected tendencies among activist media-makers worldwide in his 1984 book *Radical Media: The Political Experience of Alternative Communication*. In it, he emphasizes four areas:

- the stress upon cultural politics over that of reductive economic thinking;
- a critique of the centralized party and vanguard politics;
- the prioritization of social formations over that of rigid institutional structures; and
- the incorporation of prefigurative politics.[5]

Here I wish to update Downing's original insights by exploring the anarchist-inflected video activist practices that extend into the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries within the United States.

Another caveat: I am emphasizing groups and individuals with anarchist affinities, not necessarily self-identified anarchists. As much as anarchism proper has been growing for the past fifty years, anarchist affinities have even more significantly been adopted by activist groups and media-makers who wouldn't primarily identify themselves as anarchists for varying reasons.

A move towards more anarchist-inflected organization within the U.S. oppositional groups emerged during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Such an organizational structure rejected explicit hierarchical structures for direct-action and participatory democracy that entailed consensus-based decision-making. For example, these principles were embodied in the early actions and rhetoric of New Left groups like Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).[6]



The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee lunch counter sit-ins of 1960 utilized locally autonomous and informal organization that challenged more hierarchical organizational structures of other Left organizations.

SNCC's most successful direct-action campaign of occupying lunch counters led to its initial adherence to decentralization.[7] Consensus-based decision-making provided for developmental power by training those who had been historically disenfranchised from decision-making into the governing process, thereby undercutting a sense of helplessness by making them active agents of social change.

By the late 1960s, as some sectors of the New Left drifted towards Marxist-Leninism, and New Left goals of Third World revolution or even stopping the Vietnam War seemed more unobtainable than ever, many of its members entered into countercultural and/or direct-action formations that were more hospitable to their anarchist tendencies. It entailed a move away from attacking state power directly and instead establishing cultural alternatives to an industrial-based, hierarchical society.[8] As Barbara Epstein notes,

“The counterculture’s use of guerrilla theater and other forms of creative expression, its lack of interest in the conventional political arena, suggested that revolution had more to do with thinking and living differently, and convincing others to make similar changes, than with seizing power.”[9]

This interest in culture did not necessarily mean the abandonment of politics altogether, but the formation of a new type of politics that Julie Stephens has labeled as “anti-disciplinary.” She defines it as

“a language of protest which rejected hierarchy and leadership, strategy and planning, bureaucratic organization and political parties and was distinguished from the New Left by its ridiculing of political commitment, sacrifice, seriousness and coherence.”[10]

Theodore Roszak emphasized the implicit politics behind the seemingly apolitical counterculture:

“They seek to invent a cultural base for New Left politics, to discover new types of community, new family patterns, new sexual mores, new kinds of livelihood, new esthetic forms, new personal identities on the far side of power politics, the bourgeois home, and the consumer society.”[11]

In other words, they redeployed some of the anarchist-inflected practices found within earlier New Left tactics and strategies of SDS and SNCC into their lifestyle practices.

The merging of the New Left with the counterculture accompanied the blossoming of anarchism proper during the late 1960s and early 1970s within the United States with Murray Bookchin serving as its main proselytizer. He emphasized how these new lifestyle practices were deeply tied to an anarchist politics. He articulates the dialectical relation between lifestyle and politics that anarchism embraced in his 1970 introduction to *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* by stressing that every revolutionary must incorporate and manifest his/her radical outlook into his/her everyday practices.[12] The personal and the political must merge as long as lifestyle practices do not eclipse larger and more systemic political goals.

Such a view extended to those direct-action groups that also saw lifestyle and culture at the core of their politics as well as to some configurations of the counterculture. Problems arose, however, in the lack of clarity of when



Murray Bookchin (1921-2006), one of the central thinkers who linked anarchism and ecology together and became influential upon the counterculture. His artisanal view of humanizing technology complemented the 1970s video guerrillas' similar ecological, anarchist-inflected outlook in their own utilization of portable video.

and if such lifestyle activism was serving as a means or an ends, placing individual interests in an uneasy balance with larger political goals.

The rise of the video guerrillas

In many ways, the emergence of video guerrillas in the 1970s within the United States is an extension of the anarchist-inflected counterculture as these media makers wielded newly available Portapaks in small collectives as they attempted to create a more democratic media ecology. Their goal was to see consumer and producer merge by allowing ordinary people to create their own culture and seize control over their lives and environment. [13] Murray Bookchin shares very close links with the video guerillas' outlook in that he most directly emphasized the links between ecology, anarchism, and technology throughout the 1960s. In his 1962 book *Our Synthetic Environment*, he identified the underlying alienation that accompanied mass culture and industrial bureaucracy that most ecological outlooks shared.

Video guerrilla groups like the Videofreex, Global Village, and Ant Farm similarly rejected this alienation by establishing communes in the hopes of escaping such bureaucratic institutions and outlooks. They fled from the increasing competition among video groups within cities like Manhattan and San Francisco. Furthermore, they wanted to distinguish their media practices and lifestyles from that found within corporate media that bureaucratized and compartmentalized media production into a series of discrete jobs that made it difficult for a more holistic approach to media to take hold.

In his 1965 essay, "Towards a Liberatory Technology," Bookchin outlines a use of technology that uncannily anticipates the video guerrillas' own outlook. Within it, he asserts that technology "can help *humanize* society" if it is incorporated into small-scale communities.[14] He asserts that such a community "may well want to assimilate the machine to artistic craftsmanship." Incorporating such a practice is exactly what the video guerrillas did by using portable video technology in their daily lives and revealing how technological vision can be wielded to a humane outlook.[15] Philosophically, Bookchin continues chronicling the new type of vision that such technological incorporation would make possible:

"Quality and artistry would supplant the current emphasis on quality and standardization...; an economy of cherished things, sanctified by a sense of tradition and by a sense of wonder for the personality and artistry of dead generations, would replace the mindless seasonal restyling of commodities; innovations would be made with a sensitivity for the natural inclinations of man as distinguished from the engineered pollution of taste by the mass media." [16]

Overall, Bookchin asserts, "a technology for life must be *based* on the community." [17] He suggests an ecological understanding of media that the video guerrillas will also adopt in their own use of technology as they attempt to harmonize their use of technology with that of the natural world. As Bookchin notes elsewhere, "Ecology deals with the dynamic



Radical Software, the central publication of the video guerrillas, regularly published ecological statements on technology.

balance of nature, with the interdependence of living and nonliving things.”[18] Similarly, in an early issue of *Radical Software*, for example, its editors write,

“Our species will survive neither by totally rejecting nor unconditionally embracing technology-but by humanizing it; by allowing people access to the informational tools they need to shape and reassert control over their lives.”[19]

An ecological outlook defined much of the video guerrillas’ vision as they redesigned living spaces to merge with their emphasis upon collective video production and consumption, which can be witnessed in part through the numerous weekly video shows they held in their reconfigured downtown lofts.

This outlook can also be seen in the minimalist and rough aesthetics of their videos where they minimized editing since it was not only a labor-intensive process when utilizing early primitive editing systems, but also they wanted to allow the moment to unfold before the camera without unduly manipulating its natural process through editing. Clearly, the very presence of the camera influenced the recorded moment, which most video guerrillas were well aware of. But they attempted to minimize the camera’s presence by often hanging out with groups for some duration before taping or taping less obtrusively by often sacrificing a well-framed composition instead for a more natural but badly framed moment.

In contrast to some of the counterculture’s rejection of technology, the video guerrillas wanted to humanize it. As John Burris asserts,

“The communications technology itself, was seen as the key to mastering a whole set of social relationships: between the individual and society, between the individual and the environment, among groups of individuals, extending into the power relations within society itself.”[20]

Despite their ecological and anarchist-inflected vision, however, the video guerrillas were riddled with their own contradictions. For example, despite some of the Videofreex’s oppositional attitude towards commercial media, their very existence in part was dependent upon it. David Cort, Curtis Ratcliff, and Parry Teasdale—its original three members—met Nancy Cain, Carol Vontobel, and Skip Blumberg, who eventually became central members, at CBS. The latter three were hired by CBS to help assist the Videofreex produce a show that would replace *The Smothers Brothers*



Spontaneous shots of outer Chicago from the Videofreex 1969 tape *Subject to Change*. The tape was supposed to replace *The Smother Brothers Comedy Hour* for CBS, but its experimental form caused the network’s top brass to reject it either as ahead of its time or “a piece of shit” depending upon the executive asked.



Subject to Change footage of Abbie Hoffman critiquing Judge Julius Hoffman as a humorless executioner of the court during the Chicago Seven trial.

Comedy Hour. As the latter three engaged with the Freex and struck up friendships with them, their allegiances gradually shifted to the Freex. They joined them after the Freex ill-fated show, *Subject to Change*, flopped with network executives.[21] The rest of the Freex like Chuck Kennedy, Davidson Gigliotti, Bart Friedman, and Ann Woodward were picked up along the way.

Both Cort's and Teasdale's oppositional attitudes at the time towards commercial television made their collaboration with CBS a doomed endeavor to begin with. Teasdale reflects, "Video technology neatly fit with the revolutionary ethic of the time in that it didn't matter so much what you produced so long as you didn't do what they — the broadcasters — did." [22] Carol Vontobel adds, "Self-righteousness was all over the place." [23]

David Cort similarly romanticizes the Freex opposition to CBS. "We were just so anarchistic then that we weren't ready for it," recalls Cort. [24] Cort continues,

"CBS was an intrusion but it gave money. It was and wasn't an intrusion. It was an intrusion in a lot of ways because we rejected it as it was happening. It was built-in failure. ... We felt broadcast was not free—increased inside formats that did not permit any kind of real communication. So there was rejection."

Yet as Cort notes, CBS provided them with needed money that allowed them to pay for utilities and rent their NYC Prince Street loft where they held their weekly video shows. Also CBS provided the Freex with the most advanced video equipment at the time, particularly an editing deck. Although this equipment was only to be loaned to the Freex, they kept it after having their contract with CBS terminated. Finally, Cain, Vontobel, and Blumberg became central players in producing their weekly low-power television show *Lanesville TV* when they moved upstate. So despite some of the Freex oppositional attitude towards CBS, the network provided key equipment, personnel, and money to continue the Freex' existence.

Similarly, in spite of the video guerrillas' rhetoric regarding decentralization and a non-hierarchical outlook, their sustained existence was dependent upon state sponsorship. New York City became a hub of video guerrilla work due to the growing funds made available for it through the New York State Council on the Arts. The Council's video budget rapidly increased to \$20,208,570 during its 1970-1971 year when grants were first made available to video collectives. It increased to \$34,000,000 by 1974-1975. [25] Roughly seven to ten grants were distributed to various video groups like Raindance, People's Video Theatre, Videofreex, and Global Village. Although the groups formed collective structures before the initiation of grants, such grants were originally only made available to video groups, therefore encouraging their collective structures to remain in place despite growing internal tensions in some of them.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



The fluid camera movements of People's Video Theatre (PVT) that capture both participants and observers of the Women's Liberation March.



Grant money also supported vital infrastructure for video groups like the Artist's Television Workshop at WNET "to enable artists' access to experiment with videotape," and allowed the creation of Television Lab that became crucial in providing post-production facilities for many video groups and artists as well as aiding distribution of their work over a broadcast network.[26][[open endnotes in new window](#)] This infrastructure assisted New York City in becoming a vital center of video experimentation due to the state's relatively generous support.

Finally, the video guerrillas' white and middle-class privileges seriously impeded their work with historically disenfranchised groups. By all accounts, People's Video Theatre was the most concerned with outreach. It ran from 1970 to 1972, led by Howie Gutstadt, Elliot Glass, Ken Marsh, and Ben Levine, and focused on lending the video equipment and services to historically disenfranchised peoples. One way in which they did this was by mediating conflicts among various ethnic/racial groups.

For example, because of construction occurring in downtown Manhattan, younger African-Americans and older Jews were being pushed together residentially, resulting in culture clash. According to Ben Levine,

"They did this interview back and forth, mediating showing each side what the other was saying about them. They would play it back, but because the Portapak didn't play back, they would hand-out flyers for people to come to this loft at 14th Street and Sixth Avenue." [27]

The screening would bring both groups together. Because playback would force the other group to listen, a better understanding was had.

People's Video Theatre became so well-known locally for resolving conflict through videotape that the Mayor of South Orange, New Jersey hired them to mediate racial tension between African Americans and whites. Levine recalls the tape:

"This was a dramatic, heart-wrenching tape of people who felt lost in their own town and at odds with everybody else. It really showed the town."

But People's Video Theatre's involvement with the Puerto Rican-based Young Lords was more problematic. Although they gave the Lords a Portapak, this did not facilitate any closer relationship between them. In fact, as Levine remembers,

"They were using us like we were using them. It was probably the most business-like thing we had ever done . . . We had legitimate interests working with them, and it was somewhat of a disappointment that they were insular and weren't about to involve a group of people in their activities."

Unmentioned, however, were also the limits of PVT in creating structural



People's Video Theatre taping a debate among a participant and a critic of the Gay Pride March. Notable is the civil exchange between the two that reveals the march as not just a site of confrontation but also of discussion.

support and outreach with minority communities like the Lords. The “gift” of video equipment—in spite of good intentions—replicates a colonial relation between white benefactors bestowing goods upon the colonized receiver to ingratiate oneself into the “tribe.” The Lords, a highly political group, most likely saw this interaction along such lines, thus placing PVT at an even greater distance.

In a People's Video Theatre compilation tape, one can see the increasing distance manifesting itself between the videomakers and the more marginalized groups they filmed. During the tape's earlier sequences about a women's liberation march and gay pride march, the camera moves fluidly between participants and observers, and its interviewers interject their own opinions by engaging off-camera with their subjects. They move in and out of the march to get a variety of point of views. During the Gay Pride march, for example, the videomakers document a debate between a lesbian and an older, white homophobic man. It is a remarkable encounter where neither yell at one another but engage in sustained dialogue. The camera shifts back and forth from one to another as they exchanging points of view. The woman asks him,

“Why don't you have some of our gay activists come on your show and get this out? It would be wonderful copy for you, and I'm sure we'd be happy to go on the air and talk about it.”

Although the man remains reluctant to do so, this meta-moment of filming reveals the power of showing an actual reasoned discussion between opposing points that validates the parade not only for drawing those together with a similar point of view, but also for creating occasional moments of interchange among those with differing outlooks.



The increasing psychic and political distance between PVT and the woman of the Young Lords seen through the tape's more formal interview style.

When it comes to the Young Lords tape, however, the interchange is much more regimented between the videomakers and a Puerto Rican female speaker. She is the only person who speaks during the tape although we see shots of others milling about the occupied church that the Lords seized. She speaks in a stilted manner about how one of their members was killed in jail—most likely through the guards' brutality or intentional neglect: “These are our people. We want to protect those people. We want to defend them, and we want to start it here.”

The tape reveals less about entering the moment and having interactions unfold before one as occurred during the Women's Lib and Gay Pride marches. Instead the mediamakers use video in a more programmatic and functional way to deliver the Young Lords' propaganda. The interviewer doesn't intervene; no one questions the woman's statements; nor does the video have other points of view that might challenge the single one that's expressed. The tape exposes a distance between the videomakers and their subjects, seen now in the lack of fluid camera movements or interchange between makers and those filmed.

During the final sequence in the compilation tape, concerning a Native American action occupying Plymouth Rock, the camera is the most removed. While Native Americans occupy a boat, the camera remains onshore observing the action from a distance with the mostly white bystanders. Although various Native Americans are interviewed, a standard interview format once again ensues as in the Young Lords' tape.



A Native American occupation of Plymouth Rock videotaped by PVT. The camera films the action from a distance on shore. PVT is longer a part of the demonstration like the earlier Gay Pride and Women's Liberation marches. The extreme distance between subject and the videomakers exposes the skepticism many Native Americans held towards white video guerrillas' interests in their actions.

The various videos' differing aesthetics suggest an increasing distance between the groups being filmed and the videomakers. The more rigid and distanced stylistic vocabulary of the latter tapes expose strained or formal relations between subjects and those behind the camera. This is not unique in that it harkens back to the problematic racial and class relations that various white New Left groups and activists experienced between themselves and radical African-Americans and their groups such as the Black Panthers and SNCC during the mid-1960s.

At its most uncritical, a fetishization by the white New Left arose regarding people of color's struggles. That is, uncritical adulation supplanted discussion and critique regarding marginalized groups' actions and philosophies. As Todd Gitlin relates, in the heated days of the late 1960s where revolutionary rhetoric and insurrectionary fantasies exploded across the nation, "the black underclass, rioting in the streets, were the plausible cadres."^[28] White New Left groups grafted upon and at times attempted to trump people of color's actions and resistances. For instance, the Weathermen, a splinter group from SDS comprised mostly of the sons and daughters of wealthy, white parents, perhaps most egregiously illustrates such white adventurism in their advocacy for violence. They infuriated black and Latino groups during their rampage of property destruction in Chicago during their 1969 Days of Rage. Despite early warnings from the Black Panthers and the Young Lords that their actions will cause people of color to unduly suffer police repression unleashed by such tactics, the Weathermen nonetheless engaged in such destruction regardless that they lacked any support from the working-class communities that such actions were supposed to incite.

Although the video guerrilla groups did not share the revolutionary vision of the more militant sects of the white New Left, they nonetheless remained deferential to the radical minority groups they videotaped as exhibited in their more stolid filming style and lack of interaction and questioning them during interviews. The Videofreex, for example, became most famous for their 1969 taped interview with Black Panther Fred Hampton made only a few weeks before his murder by the police. Although they made numerous tapes with the Black Panthers, the Videofreex never seriously questioned the racial privileges that dictated their videomaking practices. The same can be said for most of the other video guerrilla groups that were predominantly white and middle-class. Although they all clearly sympathized with various disenfranchised peoples' struggles, they routinely failed to analyze how such oppressive conditions might relate to their own socio-economic status and privileges that allowed them the opportunities to videotape in the first place.

If anything, the mere presence of having Native Americans filmed speaks highly of a certain level of trust that People's Video Theatre generated—as opposed to most of the other video guerrilla groups. For example, when the Videofreex attempted to film Native Americans occupying Alcatraz in 1969, they were denied access. Nancy Cain recalls, "A lot of the Native Americans who were sitting-in didn't trust him [Bart Friedman] and it would be tough for Bart to get any intimate footage."^[29]

Instead, all that appears in the final footage of Videofreex' *Subject to Change* is the mention of the Alcatraz occupation over the radio news —“the Indians are demanding that the island be turned over to them for an educational and cultural center”— as the Freex filmed within an independent radio station. For all its trappings of spontaneous, experimental video with its freeform style and countercultural content concerning an alternative school and the Chicago Seven Trial, this moment of *Subject to Change* exposes that the Freex relationship with Native Americans is no better than that of commercial media. Access is denied to commercial and alternative media forms alike since the wages of whiteness unite them in ways that Native American activist groups find equally troubling. This happens despite all the populist banter regarding decentralization and indigenous media from the video guerrillas. By not addressing their own relations to and benefits from structural inequities, the video guerrillas often played into them as they naively thought their anarchist-inflected videomaking practices and open filming style could somehow jettison history and their privileges.

Punk anarchism and the alter-globalization movement

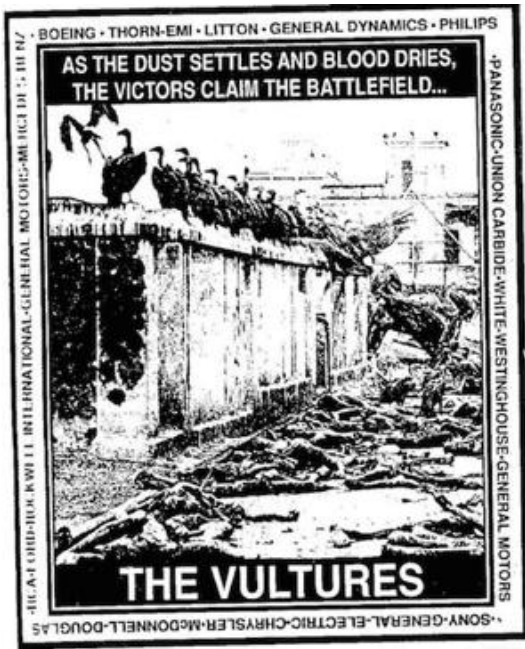
Anarchist-inflected tendencies have only increased throughout the late 1980s and 1990s. Groups like the Clamshell Alliance and the Abalone Alliance more systematically integrated consensus-based decision-making and direct-action into the activist Left during the late 1970s and early 1980s.[30] By the late 1980s and early 1990s the punk rock scene became more intertwined with activism, particularly that concerning animal rights and the environment. Bands like Insted and Earth Crisis endorsed an explicitly vegan outlook. The direct-action practices of groups like EarthFirst!, Animal Liberation Front, and the Cascadia Forest Defenders appealed to many punks' do-it-yourself ethos and anti-authoritarian attitudes. As Craig O'Hara notes,

“Punks are primarily anarchists...That is not to say that all Punks are well read in the history and theory of anarchism, but most do share a belief formed around the anarchist principles of having no official government or rulers, and valuing individual freedom and responsibility.”[31]

Such anti-authoritarian, anarchist tendencies can often lead to problematic nihilistic and libertarian outlooks where individuals' rights trump any notion of social justice. David DeLeon addresses the libertarian impulses found within U.S. anarchism's resurgence during the 1960s and 1970s. SDS and the libertarian Young Americans for Freedom, for example, shared many anti-bureaucratic and anti-hierarchical stances, but held very different goals.[32]

This political convergence of radical and conservative outlooks most likely stems in part from new anarchism's middle-class roots and lack of connection to older anarchist practices and history due to the political suppression by the U.S. government through the Red Scare in the 1920s and McCarthyism throughout the 1940s onwards.[39] David DeLeon highlights new anarchism's middle-class character as it develops “elaborate expositions of many bourgeois values—while zealously proclaiming itself to be anti-bourgeois.”[34] For example, the fantasy that individual resistance could lead to systemic subversion speaks to an over-idealized notion of





The 1990-1991 Gulf War politicized many U.S. anarchist punks, leading to an influx of even more anarchist-influenced people into the animal and environmental rights movements as well as into the alter-globalization movement. The anti-war imagery found in the pages of the March 1991 issue of punk zine *Profane Existence* represents a fairly typical politicized punk outlook.

individual agency. It complements a neoliberal outlook that promotes “the idea that we are each endowed with the agency to choose the best way of life and that the means to realize our choices are readily available if only we will commit to them.”[35] Many of these symptoms of magical thinking can be seen in the U.S. punk scene

Yet some punk collectives explicitly advocated for the politicization of punk in the early 1990s. In “A New Punk Manifesto,” Profane Existence asserts that

“punks do an excellent job, for the most part, in developing their own community. It’s time to take that experience into the larger community and infuse our spirit and creativity with mass-based revolutionary potential.”[36]

This desire to be more politically engaged led to punks’ growing involvement in antiwar activities against the first Gulf War as well as increasing participation in the emerging alter-globalization movement. As one anarchist zine observes,

“So-called ‘summit-hopping’ offered many of the same inducements as punk—risk, excitement, togetherness, opportunities to be creative and oppose injustice—along with the additional attraction of feeling that you were on the front lines of history.”[37]

Thus, zines like *Punk Planet* dedicated entire issues to alter-globalization resistances as well as to key Left figures.[38]

Some punks clearly saw protest politics as a mere extension of another “scene,” a new underground to tap into but not truly engage with. The inheritances of such a narcissistic and juvenile outlook can still be witnessed today. While attending the 2012 protests against the Republican National Convention in Tampa, Florida, I encountered three black-clad Caucasian punk men sitting in sweltering 90-degree heat who refused to offer any information about an upcoming protest action. As one stated, “You need to stick around for three or four hours and see when people are getting their water bottles and back packs.” His friend chimed in, “People are working on it, but no one is going to tell you.”

Although I partially understood their implicit message—if I want to participate in an action, I need to fully experience the context it emerges from—it was completely impractical in a city where protest camps were spread miles away from one another. The sheer skepticism and hostility from these three made it clear why many explicit forms of U.S. anarchism in general are so insular, white, and dogmatic. The lack of outreach and general desire to connect with others pushes such anarchism into a clique where adolescent tendencies inherited from the punk scene infect and undermine politics. These men’s silence and oppositional attitude boiled down to one central smug stance: we know something you don’t — regardless if it concerns a new band or a protest action. We are hip, and you haven’t proven yourself to deserve this information. This might be an acceptable attitude for the punk scene, but it’s suicidal in terms of fostering a political movement.



Indymedia became an outlet for many activist-oriented U.S. punk rockers who had become tired with the nihilism and juvenile outlook of the music scene. Yet certain idealizations like the belief that free labor was somehow outside capitalist appropriation rather than central to it remained, leading to some exclusionary activist practices that prohibited many from historically disenfranchised communities from participating.

Yet other punks did become more significantly politically involved such as assisting in forming Indymedia during the 1999 World Trade Organization protests in Seattle and extending it into other cities and countries. It became the first web-based, open access journalism platform years before the advent of social media sites like Twitter and Facebook made immediate updates commonplace. It particularly endorsed a D.I.Y. ethic in its mantra — “Be the Media” — as it encouraged politically active people to blog, videotape, and photograph protest events and other activities by providing immediate distribution through its open-source platform.

<<https://www.mediamobilizing.org/>>

Needless to say, its dependency on unpaid labor led many inequities to arise. But many of its participants learned their lessons from their Indymedia days by establishing new media activist organizations like Philadelphia’s Media Mobilizing Project (MMP) and the Canadian Media Co-Op movement that engage various disenfranchised communities by providing more support systems like skills-sharing classes, paid positions, funded work, and the like. [39] MMP, for example, focuses on using media production to mobilize various working-class communities in the greater Philadelphia area.[40]



The Canadian Media Co-Op corrects some of the inequities perpetuated by Indymedia by creating financial support for contributors as well as providing skills-sharing classes for those communities that have been historically denied access to the press and video.

Along similar lines the Vancouver Media Co-Op <<http://vancouver.mediacoop.ca/>> engages different indigenous groups to report on the environmental and human rights abuses perpetuated by transnational corporations and the Canadian government. The Co-Op was at the forefront of reporting indigenous protests against the 2010 Winter Olympic Games and critiquing the environmentally destructive oil extraction occurring within the Alberta Tar Sands and the creation of Keystone XL pipeline that would disregard the sovereignty of many indigenous groups by running throughout their lands without their permission.

From this longer historical perspective, Occupy Wall Street (OWS) is only the latest manifestation of a long lineage of Left anarchist-inflected structures. Although Occupy didn’t highly publicize its anarchist tendencies, they predominated throughout all the Occupy incarnations across the U.S. and led to some tensions between those who explicitly self-identified as anarchists and those who didn’t.[41] As we will see later, in spite of its anarchist aspirations, OWS was mired in many of the same contradictions that haunt much anarchist-inspired media activism that tends to over-value individual action while failing to fully explore more systemic limits to individual initiative that disproportionately impact people of color and working-class communities.

Neoliberal reconfigurations and the fight over communications

The rise of anarchist-inflected structures during the later twentieth-century also accompanied the transformation of capitalism into neoliberal directions during the 1970s. Many homologies arose between the new anarchism and neoliberalism. Both rejected older, industrial-based, vertical models of authority for more network-like structures. While the new anarchism ostensibly thought such structures would challenge authority, neoliberalism incorporates authority into new nodal forms. Both rejected state authority as intrusive and oppressive upon individual agency. But whereas the new anarchism often viewed the individual in existentialist terms capable of reinventing oneself freely if only external constraints were lifted, neoliberalism promoted the individual as an entrepreneur marshaling his/her personal resources for financial success. Both saw lifestyle choices as increasingly important. For anarchists, lifestyle choices verified one's anarchism by incorporating its politics and practices into everyday routines. Neoliberalism, on the other hand, increasingly suffused individuals' lives with a capitalist outlook that would have been unthinkable earlier such as directly advertising to children in the 1980s that was rejected in earlier decades as morally reprehensible and detrimental to children's wellbeing. Individual choice, as a result, becomes over-valORIZED as corporations like Starbucks misleading suggestion [responsibility](http://www.starbucks.com/responsibility) that buying a cup of coffee in a recycled cup is "environmentally friendly" by effacing the exploitation of people, land, and animals that coffee production entails.

Most importantly, subjectivity itself became a key terrain of struggle as capitalism increasingly infringed upon it. This was a key discovery made by Italian Autonomist Marxists like Franco Berardi, Mario Tronti, Silvia Federici, and Antonio Negri during the 1960s and 1970s as they assisted factory workers, students, and women to break from Capital's regime. They saw Capital's progression as an increasing encroachment into every aspect of one's life whereby the post-industrial economy moves beyond the point of production to harness people's subjectivities as grist for surplus value. Capital siphons off the labor, creativity, and affects produced by others to produce surplus value.

Capital's harnessing of profitability from subjectivity itself can be no better exemplified by the rise of social media where users become both content producers and consumers. Corporate entities provide platforms where its users dedicate endless hours producing and consuming content, distributing information, and willfully disclosing critical personal data to third-party providers. Leisure and work conflate as production and consumption radically converge while individuals dedicate untold hours of free labor to the maintenance of such sites as well as creating increasingly detailed digital footprints that capitalism can harness to predict consumer trends, surveil people's whereabouts, and track individual behavior. Identity/subjectivity marks a central site of battle since it traverses production and exhibition realms.

As a result, media production becomes a primary strategy where new collective forms of subjectivity might develop and challenge the practices of neoliberalism, which we will see in terms of AIDS activism. Media production, distribution, and exhibition/reception are where such critical subjectivities are nurtured and developed. Not surprisingly, radical media attempts to produce more democratic than hierarchical structures since its members understand the egalitarian goals that it strives to achieve.[42]

Yet the risk of all radical media is that its current configurations are in part

determined by a neoliberal context. Media activists' increasing access to and use of relatively inexpensive digital media technology like camcorders, editing software, and eventually computers in the United States was made possible by international corporations making available in select markets cheap consumer technology. It is no coincidence that Samsung and Sony were strong supporters of video artists like Nam Jun Paik since his incorporation and popularization of their equipment through his artistic work was viewed as free advertising.[43] Since such technology like the Portapak was first made widely available within the United States and its \$1500-2000 price tag largely ensured only those with the cultural and financial capital could purchase it, its initial presence ended up re-inscribing varying degrees of gender, racial, class, and sexual privileges and hierarchies into such activist practices. This does not make such video-based activism deterministically appropriated by capital and becoming nothing more than "Sunday tinkering on the periphery of the system," as Jean Baudrillard might charge.[44] But it does give one room to pause about how seeming binaries between capitalism and anarchist-inflected media activist practices blur as they become mutually dependent to an extent.

Lifestyle practices, for example, can become over-valORIZED by anarchist-inflected media activists as "fantasies of individual resistance as systemic subversion." [45] We can see such assumptions operating when certain Indymedia activists during the early 2000s fetishized free labor as somehow inherently democratic rather than seeing it as a central paradigm for capitalism. Matthew Arnison argues that Indymedia is different from earlier alternative news shows that were mainly be used to train people for professional jobs:

"And that's where we can break the whole system down because we're not trying to have paid employees; we're not trying to have jobs. It's just volunteer-based and hopefully it will always be volunteer-based." [46]

An idealization of networks and naivety regarding capitalist practices frame Arnison's comment that associates paid work with professionalization whereas unpaid labor somehow inherently leads towards non-monetary, "authentic," activist goals.

Capitalism, however, suggests otherwise. As many feminists like Selma James, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Kathi Weeks, Silvia Federici, and Leopoldina Fortunati have shown, unpaid labor has always been a staple of capitalist production as innumerable hours of unpaid domestic work provided the critical infrastructure for paid labor. James and Dalla Costa, for instance, assert, "Domestic work produces not merely use values, but is essential to the production of surplus value." [47] The heterosexual family serves as "the very pillar of the capitalist organization of work" where male workers rejuvenate themselves daily for their next day's onslaught at the job, where new workers are produced, raised, and trained, and where affective relations between family members moderately temper the intolerable conditions of capitalism.[48] As Leopoldina Fortunati writes,

"Despite their seeming separation, the capitalist mode of production is based on the indissoluble connection that links reproduction with production, because the second is both a precondition and a condition of the existence of the first." [49]

Neoliberalism, if anything, further incorporates and makes explicit such

free labor and its affective dimensions into its structure. Silvia Federici, for example, highlights how the service, recreation, and entertainment industries “are picking up the traditionally female task of making one’s family happy and relaxed” by exploiting the affective labor that once was primarily located in the home.[50] The ubiquity of cell phones and mobile digital screens places individuals on constant call and hopelessly blurs leisure and labor time. Spec, freelance, and unpaid work dominates much commercial media production. And as the historical record shows, many who had been central in producing Indymedia at the time easily shifted into professional media jobs thereafter or simultaneously held corporate jobs while engaging in Indymedia activities during their free time.

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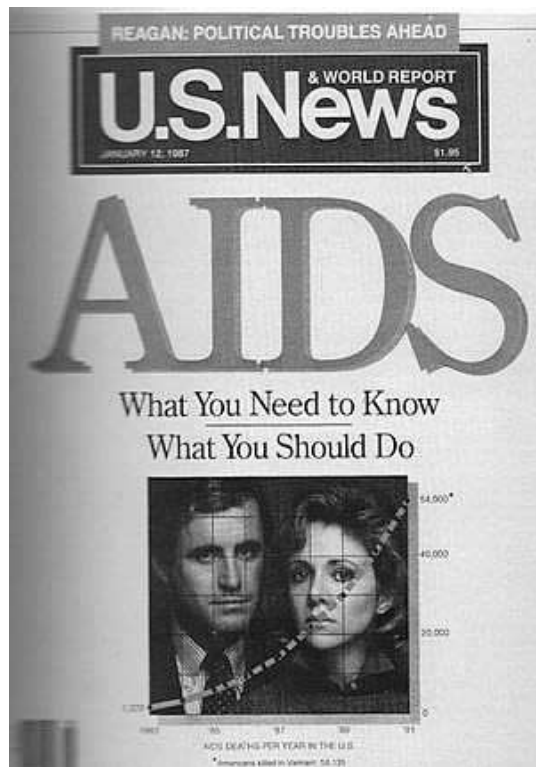
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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Philadelphia-based Media Mobilizing Project, with many of its founders originally having been a part of Indymedia, engages working-class communities in their own activist-inflected media production to build coalitions and foster collective action.



AIDS activists like those within ACT UP had to counter the misinformation regarding AIDS and

The failure to not recognize the centrality of unpaid labor within capitalism shows an utter lack on some Indymedia activists' part to recognize how capitalism works and to take for granted the sexist, gendered nature that such free work has always entailed. Yet such a stance recurrently emerged among Indymedia activist discussions. In 2004, for example one member through the Indymedia list-serve suggested that some volunteers get paid at least a minimum wage in order for critical work to get completed. But another immediately replied,

"I do not agree that we must, or should, 'dirty our hands' with it [money]...Activism is not, should not be, a means to make a buck." [51] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

Unpaid labor also arises again in 2006 when some Indymedia participants claim one shouldn't receive pay since

"for [Subcommandante] Marcos, and for many IMCistas of the global South, not receiving pay is one of the essential aspects of being part of our movement." [52]

Little did some of these activists know that the free labor they were celebrating held a much more vexed relationship to the capitalist practices that they ostensibly rejected.

If we hope to analyze much U.S. video and media activism in the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries, we must come to terms with how anarchist affinities define many of its practices and sometimes outlooks. Furthermore, we must recognize how such anarchist-inflected media-making reveals some affinities with neoliberal practices.

The struggle over media production serves as a central battle ground against a neoliberal regime. Communications industries attempt to establish subjectivities that are compliant with the practices and ideologies of neoliberalism as commercial film, television, radio, and internet platforms often promote commodified understandings of existence and limited predisposed ways of interaction. For example, I recall a commercial screening of Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* in 2004 where a local "independent" theater in rural Pennsylvania attempted to disavow the Left politics of the film by distributing a sheet of counterarguments to viewers of the film's indictment of George Bush Jr.'s policies. Not only the film's anti-Bush content, but also the way in which the film served as a mobilizing event for Moveon.org <<http://www.moveon.org/pac/news/f911-tonight.html>> to rally around and establish pro-Democrat phone banks and house parties alarmed the theater's owner. Although the film's content and Moveon.org's mobilizing around the film were rather moderate compared to more radical critiques and counter-cinema practices of groups like the New York Film and Photo League in the 1930s, Newreel in the 1960s and 1970s, and Media Mobilizing Project in the present, they were unorthodox enough from the commodified ways in which the theater normally functioned to force its owner to engage in defensive maneuvers to

those living with it perpetuated by commercial publications like *U.S. News & World Report*. Simon Watney highlighted in *Policing Desire*: “Fighting AIDS is not just a medical struggle, it involves our understanding of the words and images which load the virus down with such a dismal cargo of appalling connotations.”



Douglas Crimp highlighted such exhibits like *Let the Record Show* as indicative of the new type of activist-inflected art produced by groups allied with ACT UP. In place of art's ability to transcend the moment, Crimp insisted upon artistic “practices actively participating in the struggle against AIDS.”

disavow any implicit support the screening of the film might hold. Such a moment dramatically exposes the implicit ideological struggle that a seemingly innocuous film screening holds. It also reveals how heavily entrenched some supposedly “independent” theaters are in the commodified ways of film viewing and fearful of any content and viewing practices that veer too Left of center.

The battle over video production takes on heightened importance in the next section discussing AIDS activism. As we will see, the very balance of people's lives hang in the balance depending upon if they are viewed as either “deserving victims” of AIDS or as engaged, informed, fully human beings who deserve assistance and other people's respect. Who controls the media message holds very direct implications for people living with AIDS regarding their survival. AIDS video activism grounds the importance of how new forms of collective subjectivities can arise through media production and spectacle-based events that challenge the hegemony of the State and its homophobic outlook that initially disregarded thousands of gay men's deaths as nothing more than inevitable casualties.

Anarchist-inflected media and AIDS activism

The emergence of ACT UP and AIDS media activism in 1987 highlights a historic moment where bodies and signification intimately intertwined [53] As Simon Watney wrote at the time,

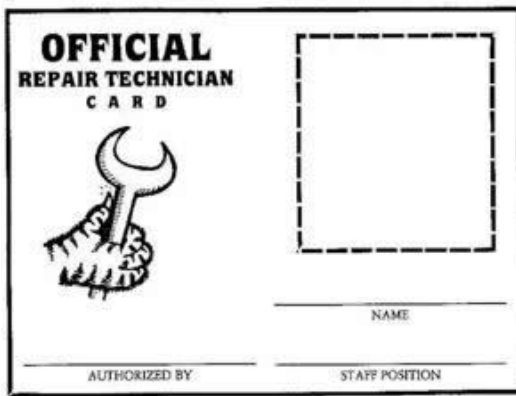
“Fighting AIDS is not just a medical struggle, it involves our understanding of the words and images which load the virus down with such a dismal cargo of appalling connotations.”[54]

Such connotations included “othering” gays by initially associating AIDS solely with them; attributing guilt to gays and minorities who contracted AIDS; and treating those living with AIDS as passive victims and assuming their deaths as inevitable—to only name a few stigmas. AIDS activists were fully aware that the commercial news media provided prescriptive descriptions of the AIDS crisis rather than simply descriptive ones. Watney observes that the media “presents the world which it would like to see in the likeness of an imaginary national past...” that celebrates white, heterosexual, middle-class, and patriarchal institutions and norms while denigrating others.[55]

The war of signification that AIDS activists engaged upon was not just some abstract enterprise, but in part determined the life or death of those living with AIDS. It draws to the forefront the importance of the struggle over new collective subjectivities that Autonomist Marxists stress. For many AIDS activists, addressing the delays of a cure led to systemic critiques of racist, sexist, classist, and homophobic practices that underlie the lack of access to health care, the refusal of schools to adequately teach safe sex, and the disproportionate numbers of African-Americans and Hispanics who contracted AIDS.

Alternative media, therefore, became central for ACT UP and AIDS activists in spite of some initial resistance to the use of video.[56] Greg Bordowitz who shot videos for ACT UP and other AIDS activist video collectives writes,

“Video ‘is not an object, but an event,’ because its production is part of a larger effort to organize increasing numbers of people to take action.”[57]



Paper Tiger Television proved critical in assisting NYC AIDS video activists with training, equipment, and down-and-dirty anarchist-inflected video production practices. The D.I.Y. Paper Tiger press passes were emulated by members of ACT UP's DIVA TV.



Under the dire conditions of the AIDS outbreak in the 1980s without any known cure and government bureaucracy inhibiting a speedy solution, ACT UP activists firmly understood both the importance of challenging commercial media's misportrayal of people living with AIDS as deserving "victims" and using alternative media as a direct-action weapon to occupy spaces to make their voices heard, bodies seen, and new collective subjectivities to take root.

Video occupied a central position for several reasons: the increased affordability of higher grade video equipment; the relatively thriving public access culture that New York City provided for the airing of tapes; the media savvy background of many AIDS activists; and the need to counter the misinformation disseminated by commercial television in an equally appealing form.

Originally, Manhattan operated as a media hub, thus providing those activists belonging to the media industry with the requisite skills, knowledge, and privilege to engage with and critique the commercial media while countering with their own alternative forms. Perhaps most important, a vital infrastructure already existed where AIDS video activism could flourish. As I indicated earlier, there had been significant state investment in alternative video during the 1970s that supported the video guerrillas and independent media production centers like Downtown Community Television and the Alternative Media Center that had established strong links in the community with their fight for public access and teaching local media production. Furthermore, the Whitney Independent Study Program drew together many of the key direct-action AIDS video activists such as Greg Bordowitz, Jean Carlomusto, Sandra Elgear, Robyn Hutt, Hilary Joy Kipnis, David Meieran, Catherine Saalfield, and Ellen Spiro, who would form Testing the Limits (TTL) and DIVA TV. [58]

Paper Tiger Television (PTTV) also provided important support and development for ACT UP video activism. Launched in 1981 as *Community Update*, PTTV supplied an important model in quick and economical media production that centered on critical analysis of commercial media, countering it with underrepresented, alternative viewpoints. Its format consisted of weekly "reading" series where a professor, activist, or likeminded host interrogated the imagery and/or words of a specific commercial media item. Such an example was central for AIDS activists who similarly unpacked and critiqued the commercial news' discourse surrounding the AIDS crisis. As DeeDee Halleck, one of the founders of PTTV, writes, "A good critical reading can invert the media so that they



DIVA TV encouraging viewers to become a DIVA like them. Jocelyn displays her D.I.Y. DIVA press pass.



DIVA announces its intention during its first broadcast of challenging "dominant media assumptions about AIDS."



Footage from DIVA TV's *Like a Prayer* (1989) reveals the intimacy between videomaker and participants. John Greyson highlights AIDS video activists' use of "intimate camera angles and their rapport with their subjects."

work against themselves."[59]

Greg Bordowitz specifically cites *Paper Tiger* as inspiration. Catherine Saalfeld, a member of ACT UP's DIVA TV, also emphasizes PTTV's importance: "As an urgent response by, for, and about the medium of television, PTTV demonstrates a methodology by which to reinterpret cultural misrepresentations using the very same tools of their production."[60] These critical reading strategies and techniques were equally applied by AIDS video activists in their own critique of the media's misrepresentation of AIDS.

PTTV's rough aesthetic also encouraged other AIDS activists to engage in their own video production. This, in fact, was one of the intended purposes of PTTV. As Halleck writes,

"If there is a specific look for the series, it is handmade, a comfortable non-technocratic look that says friendly and low budget. The seams show: we often use overview wide-angle shots to give the viewers a sense of the people who are making the show and the types of consumer-grade equipment we use."[61]

Elsewhere she continues,

"By showing the seams and the price tags, we hope to demystify the process of live television and to prove that making programs isn't all that prohibitively expensive."[62]

Its "reading" series was shot on only two cameras. One followed the host whereas a second camera either covered a related activity or shot in a wide frame to reveal the mechanics of behind-the-scenes activity like giving guests cues and framing shots. In *Herb Schiller Reads the New York Times* (1981), for example, one camera steadily focuses on Schiller critiquing each section of the Sunday *New York Times* point-by-point. The second camera either follows the activities of a woman reading the *Times* against a cardboard backdrop of a subway car or reveals the other studio camera filming Schiller.

The handmade set and title cards further accent the do-it-yourself ethos that PTTV advocated. The show provided direct media analysis in ordinary language within an intimate and "homey" environment that contrasted against the slick productions of network television that often obscured and misinformed the general public about whatever issues were being discussed. In *Herb Schiller Reads the New York Times*, PTTV's economic and straightforward style opposed the "712 pages of waste" of the Sunday *Times* that Schiller investigated and critiqued.

Some of the central figures in ACT UP video activism such as Jean



Another sequence from *Like a Prayer* where a video activist hands-off her camera to another video unit as she gets arrested. Such a moment reveals the porous membrane between the space of the political and the space of videomaking.



Roger Hallas refers to such direct-action footage found in *Target City Hall* (1989) as “embodied immediacy” that places that camera in the middle of the event. The footage also demonstrates the activist nature of videomaking that documents police arrests to be used later as evidence in court by activists to expose police violence or falsifying of charges.

Carlomusto, Greg Bordowitz, Catherine Saalfeld, Adriene Jenik, and Ray Navarro had known Halleck earlier either as their professor or from the NYC activist media scene. PTTV evidenced its anarchist affinities through its nonhierarchical structure and consensus-based decision-making that allowed access to non-professionals. Such a nonhierarchical working situation became attractive to ACT UP media activists like Catherine Saalfeld, Ellen Spiro, and others who worked with PTTV. During the 1980s, anyone attending for the first-time a taping of a PTTV show might be asked to contribute by working a camera, the switcher, lights, or making props. The collective would meet for a half-hour at a coffee shop to plan and then run to the studio to set-up for taping. As DeeDee Halleck notes, such a procedure was not as simple as it might seem:

“Most television is not made with a collaborative, non-authoritarian structure. Achieving unity and strength while maintaining maximum participation, imagination, and humanism is a basic problem for any group. To try to make a TV show in a non-authoritarian structure is formidable.”[92]

PTTV’s quick production process and accessible style resonated with the needs of AIDS activism for an urgent form of direct-action spectacle-based events to protest government policy and counter negative public perceptions of those living with AIDS in order to find an expedient cure. Furthermore, it complimented ACT UP’s own mission of challenging experts’ ill-informed opinions and news anchors’ problematic homophobic framing of the AIDS crisis by insisting that people living with AIDS could make their own media, tell their own stories, and provide their own analysis regarding the crisis.

Early AIDS activist video groups like Testing the Limits and DIVA TV adopted anarchist-inflected practices learned from both Paper Tiger and ACT UP. Every meeting opened with the statement: “ACT UP is a diverse, non-partisan group of individuals united in anger and committed to direct-action to end the AIDS crisis.” Although it might not have often lived-up to its nonpartisan aspirations or have been as welcoming to diverse peoples as possible, its intent to do so signaled an important goal. Internal debates regarding the immediate need to get drugs into white, male, middle-class bodies and a more systemic understanding of how a disproportionate number of the poor and people of color contracted AIDS and lacked basic medical and financial support often arose during ACT UP Monday night meetings. Prioritizing goals always suggests an implicit hierarchy. One can rightfully critique the inability of those who refuse to adequately self-critique such practices and explore their limitations. But the aspiration remains important for those who have grown tired with some of the undemocratic processes of other Left organizations that they might have belonged to in the past or still currently attended.

As Ann Cvetkovich observes, many members held ties to civil rights, antiwar, and feminist movements. ACT UP, therefore, “provided an important respite from fractures within [those] political communities.”[64] As one past member emphasizes,

“It was not a top-down group, it was a bottom-up group, even though there were hierarchies within ACT UP about who was cool and who got to cruise who and who go to do what. It was still a very democratic group.”[65]

Perhaps most notably, AIDS activism and ACT UP in particular fostered



A sequence in *Target City Hall* that shows anarchist-inflected activism at work. The facilitator asks the affinity group if it wants to block traffic or wait.



The handheld camera immerses viewers into the event as it attempts to capture the moment unfolding before its frame. The affective dimension of street tapes serves a crucial function of engaging viewers and approximating the energy of the action. (*Target City Hall*)



A participant expresses his concern in *Target*

alliances between lesbians and gay men that had fractured during the 1970s. In spite of certain inequities and privileges remaining among its members, which will be addressed more fully later, ACT UP nonetheless offered a more open political space than some of its members had experienced elsewhere.

The video groups' adoption of anarchist tendencies also spoke to their rejection of a commercial news model that demonized people living with AIDS, promoted homophobia, and reinforced a hierarchy of professionals in the media industry who routinely dismissed the insights of those living with AIDS. Greg Bordowitz observes,

"Both collectives [Testing the Limits and DIVA TV] use democratic forms, such as consensus decision-making. The goals of both collectives are to quickly produce tapes that can be used by AIDS-activist direct-action groups as organizing tools." [67]

DIVA member Peter Bowen states,

"Rather than having a fixed membership, a bank account, a solid identity, DIVA floats freely, making tapes with the money, technical resources and labor that is available at any one meeting." [68]

Anyone with either the skills or simple hunger to videotape could contribute to the collectives. Furthermore, this open structure not only provided for an influx of immediate assistance in creating and distributing ACT UP videos at the beginning, but it also gave meaning to people's lives when the gay and lesbian community was being decimated with no end in sight.

Testing the Limits formed spontaneously as Greg Bordowitz and David Meieran met while taping a 1987 ACT UP demonstration on Wall Street. Sandra Elgear, Robyn Hutt, Hilery Joy Kipnis, and Jean Carlomusto soon joined. According to Hutt, the collective wasn't formalized until it started to produce its first thirty minute video *Testing the Limits* (1987). [69] Also, although it assisted ACT UP and all of its members belonged to ACT UP, it always remained independent from it.

DIVA TV, on the other hand, was inspired by TTL's work and emerged as a video affinity group within ACT UP. [70] Its initial task was to produce counter-surveillance footage for ACT UP to be used to deter police violence against demonstrators during an action or to be marshalled as evidence during trials to expose police misconduct or inaccuracies. Only as an afterthought did the collective begin compiling their footage into larger video projects.

Such anarchist-inflected production practices manifested themselves in the aesthetics of both groups' direct-action videos. [71] Roger Hallas has most succinctly written about the direct-action aesthetic in *Reframing Bodies: AIDS, Bearing Witness, and the Queer Moving Image*. In it, he writes,

City Hall for the need for more cameras to protect protestors against police violence during their action.



While discussion proceeds, the camera interviews random participants to capture their nervous anticipation of their arrests. (*Target City Hall*)



After discussion and consensus, the group decides to block the street. The facilitator demonstrates how to lock arms. (*Target City Hall*)

“Embodying the radical democratic and anarchist ethos of ACT UP and its organization, direct-action video resisted the hierarchical structures of broadcast news and television documentary, which use anchors, presenters, reporters, and omniscient off-screen narrators to structure and frame the speech and events recorded by the camera.”[72]

We see the intimacy between the videographer and interviewee in a number of TTL and DIVA TV tapes. John Greyson notes how *Testing the Limits: NYC* foregrounds the collective’s “active participation in the movement, both through their intimate camera angles and their rapport with their subjects.”[73] Patricia Zimmerman notes how the footage of direct-action tapes “unsettles the very space of politics and views the space of the film and the space of the political as different registers organized around a site that is jointly shared” unlike many professional productions that maintain a distance from their subjects.[74] This space between the film and the political converges more dramatically in AIDS direct-action videos where videomakers and interviewees possessed more intimate relations through shared protest training and belonging to the same group.

Roger Hallas refers to this style as “embodied immediacy.” It not only unsettles the hierarchies of commercial news media where the anchor mediates interviewees’ observations and experts’ insights trump that of everyday people, but also challenges the physical distance commercial media holds towards such activism by instead situating viewers immediately within the event.[75] Lack of explanation and voice-over define such tapes. This style is in part intentional in order to unsettle any singular authority in explaining events to viewers. But it is also a result of necessity as the interviewer is also often shooting tape.

Not coincidentally, many of the AIDS activist direct-action tapes document anarchist-inflected processes as much as any final protest. We see this occur in DIVA TV’s *Target City Hall* (1989). At one moment a camera stands with a group of encircled protestors debating if they should block traffic in a street before City Hall. The camera circles around a friendly, white male facilitator who asks: “If we want to do it in the street now...or wait. These are the options.” Activists around him offer their support as the camera attempts to catch them in frame as they speak out. The events happen quicker than the camera’s frame can capture them, which relates the spontaneity and excitement of the moment. The facilitator, however, cautions, “If you won’t want to go, say no. Don’t feel frightened about it.” This encouragement finally elicits one man to voice his concern that more cameras should be filming them to protect them against police brutality.

This moment emphasizes the counter-surveillance function that direct-action footage offered. DIVA TV meetings dedicated part of their agenda to this goal in determining what actions they should cover. As Catherine Saalfeld notes,

“Originally, DIVA TV came together because the cops who patrol our protests and arrest us like to do it with a heavy dose of gratuitous force.”[76]

Also, the tapes were later used as evidence in court to expose police brutality and lies. Therefore, videotaping served a dual counter-surveillance function as both deterrent and evidence.



Protestors march out into the city street and block traffic. The sequence models how anarchist-inflected activism can function smoothly with a deft facilitator and participants who share intimate activist ties. (*Target City Hall*)

The facilitator carefully relates this man's concern to the group where people calmly address it in spite of the anxiety of the moment. One man says that they should protest because the media will follow them once they engage in their action. After a series of people affirm their support for the action and the camera captures the nervous excitement of the participants as many comment that it will be their first time getting arrested, the facilitator nonetheless requests that someone get more media so that the man objecting to the action "feels more comfortable." After slightly more discussion, they all agree to enter the street and start their action. The facilitator advises, "Lock arms like this and [he smiles] then walk out into the street." They do so, blocking traffic, and start chanting, "Health Care Is a Right."

It is quite simply an amazing moment of solidarity suffused with open discussion, debate, and nervous energy. Roger Hallas comments,

"The moment to act is viscerally felt through the embodied immediacy of the camera at that moment." [77]



It shows anarchism in action as it draws participants together through their discussion and shows how a skilled facilitator can advance the discussion towards a quick, harmonious decision. Contrasted against the regimented lines of police around them, the protestors' enclosed circle engaging in anarchist practices reveals the alternative world that the protestors want to enact: respectful, anti-hierarchical, and full of solidarity and humor.

This affective dimension of the video serves a vital purpose. Numerous direct-action activists emphasize the affective solidarity that such actions yield. Jeffrey Juris argues that

"these affective dynamics are not incidental; they are central to processes of movement building and activist networking . . . they constitute platforms where alternative subjectivities are expressed through distinct body and spatial techniques, and emotions are generated through ritual conflict." [78]

Direct-action video, as a result, attempts to approximate these affective dynamics to its viewers in order to mobilize them. As Jane Gaines observes,

"The whole rationale behind documenting political battles on film, as opposed to producing written records, is to make struggle visceral, to go beyond the abstractly intellectual to produce a bodily swelling." [79]



The regimented lines of the police and their hierarchical outlook contrasts against the protestors' encircled formation and open consensus-based process. (*Target City Hall*)

Direct-action video is to make activists more active by drawing the screen world and the viewer's world so near to each other that they tremble with the anticipation of collapse.



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The sequence then cuts to actual protest footage showing activists employing their training during their arrest. (*Target City Hall*)

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



A sequence from Robert Hilferty's *Stop the Church* (1990) that also emphasizes process. It shows consensus-based discussion regarding ACT UP's action to stage a die-in at St. Patrick's Cathedral over the Catholic Church's reactionary attitude towards gays and refusal to acknowledge the importance of safe sex. It documents various attitudes towards the Catholic Church. Although most participants are critical, a few want to disconnect Church dogma

But affectivity alone is not enough to sustain such work. Anarchist-inflected, direct-action videomaking makes consistent video work difficult to maintain. First of all, such videomaking is difficult to sustain. Catherine Saalfeld explains how “our last tape wallowed a year in postproduction” due to an ever-changing group of people working on it.[80] This forced DIVA to finally institute a policy that only the same group that begins a tape can work on it until completion. But this made no difference as it was the last full-length tape the group would produce. Some of the reasons for the stalling out of DIVA TV was the death of one of its core members, Ray Navarro, and the general melancholy that follows the host of other deaths its members personally witnessed as well as the gradual fracturing of ACT UP that occurred during the early 1990s. But more general reasons for its dissolution, not unique to AIDS media activists but affecting many informal media collectives throughout time, were: some of its members wanted to do their own independent work having grown as artists; others grew tired of the collective structure and its cumbersome processes; factions developed over the changing mission of the group; and lack of sustained financial support placed strains upon some of its members.

TTL, on the other hand, increasingly wanted to distribute their tapes over broadcast media, and that affected the type of structure the groups wanted. As a result of this new mission, it opted to professionalize itself as their members wanted to have their tapes viewed outside the activist community. They established official positions for producers and an assistant editor to create a structure that would allow for more consistent work to be completed as well as more efficiently to apply for grants.

Furthermore, despite the idealization of anarchist-inflected practices in a tape like *Target City Hall*, we see within the tape that most of its participants are white and a majority male during the street action we witness. This hints at the complex ways in which, although ACT UP held anarchist practices as a means to a more egalitarian world, they also reinscribed certain gender and racial privileges through their practice. As prior ACT UP member Alisa Lebow recalls,

“There was a lot of cute boys and girls who thought they were being really hip, mostly upper middle class and white. . . The kind of activism that was needed then and is needed now has never really been done, and that is being able to mobilize the poor and working-class communities of color in the city and around the country. I think I always felt that with ACT UP. They were never going to touch those communities in any significant way.”[81]

[\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

These class and racial privileges prevented some people of color from attending meetings or actions. Chas Bennet Brack recounts,

“I didn’t go because of my perception that the white gay intelligentsia was at the helm of the movement. So, I didn’t

from the more complex lives and beliefs held by actual Catholics.



Testing the Limits video collective abandoned anarchist-inflected structures for more hierarchical organizing to establish a steadier video production schedule and a professional style in order to gain network broadcast. *Voices from the Front* (1991) was created for broadcast over PBS, which it never received. However, it was shown on HBO. Its more traditional talking-head documentary style was supposed to be more palatable to wider commercial audiences.



Voices also employed graphics that named participants to better orient audiences unfamiliar with those involved with the AIDS crisis.

think that the issues of black gay men would be considered since little concrete movement, on race issues, happened in the 'queer' community.”[82]

Such a critique, however, should not be read as a general dismissal of ACT UP's vital actions. As Deborah B. Gould reminds, ACT UP forced the Center for Disease Control to include women and poor people within the definition of those with AIDS; it fought to include women in initial drug trials; and it argued for equal access to health care.[83] In fact, its upper-middle class orientation provided vital connections and skills to engage with the commercial media over AIDS. It was, as Kim Christensen, another ACT UP member, notes: the cross-class alliances within ACT UP energized their activism. Its upper-class white males belonging to a managerial class held access to resources, media outlets, and the like. “But,” she adds,

“it also then combined—and this is what I think made it both powerful and volatile—combined with a lot of people, predominantly women and some men of color, who were not from that class background but who had the political skills that these white guys needed.”[84]

Only the access provided by the upper-class white males connected with the activist savvy of its more lower and middle-class members yielded the aggressive, well-planned direct-action, spectacle-based activism that became a signature for ACT UP.

Such racist and class issues are not unique to ACT UP but instead haunt all predominantly white-run activist organizations. Many members of ACT UP recognized these limits and tried to ameliorate them. Alexandra Juhasz, for example, established video groups outside of ACT UP to better provide media access to working-class women of color. Such video work revealed the need for vital infrastructures such as time, money, and adequate working space to truly engage and include historically disenfranchised communities. This inability to develop sustained links with more diverse communities exposes the limits of anarchist-inflected practices that fail to address the surrounding socio-economic conditions that limit people's engagement, as we saw operating earlier within the video guerrillas. It is not simply the lack of access to equipment, but deeper structural constraints that prevent disadvantaged people's participation and dismiss their voice as irrelevant in the first place.[85]

The anarchist-inflected video production of ACT UP declined by the mid-1990s. As Roger Hallas describes the causes of the decline,

“The practices of direct-action video in fact waned by the mid-1990s as chapters of ACT UP across the United States fractured under the stress of multiple loss, activist burnout, and the rising conflicts between professional treatment activists, universal healthcare advocates, and HIV dissidents.”[86]

The remainder of the essay will explore how such direct-action and anarchist-inflected videomaking practices extend into the present. I will particularly highlight their intersections, also indicating some neoliberal tendencies that complicate our understanding of them.

Video ninjas

Those who comprise the elite group of activist videomakers, sometimes

referred to self-mockingly as “video ninjas,” occupy a complicated position between anarchist affinities and typical media careers. Although engaged in social justice activism and independent media, they are members of the creative class and inheritors of a neoliberal style of workflow. They comprise in part a new international division of labor being produced by the service-based, information-driven economy. They are a part of what Richard Florida refers to as the super creative core of the creative class. They are “scientists, engineers, university professors, poets and novelists, artists, entertainers, actors, designers and architects, software programmers, etc.” who comprise around 15 percent of the total population as of 2000.[87] Florida himself has idealized the flexible work patterns and creative life by ignoring the emmiserating conditions of the far more significant service economy that bolsters the few who actually prosper in such positions, but he has also correctly identified how a small contingent of the super creative class operate.

Neoliberalism privileges a select few of those from artistic backgrounds. Their fluid work practices that merge work and pleasure, emphasize non-linear thinking and affect mesh well with a knowledge-based economy. Capitalism, according to Florida, is “taking people who would once have been viewed as bizarre mavericks operating at the bohemian fringe and setting them at the very heart of the process of innovation and economic growth.”[88] Of course, as Andrew Ross points out,

“Florida’s nostrum, that creativity is everybody’s natural asset to exploit, is difficult to distinguish from any other warmed-over version of American bootstrap ideology.”[89]

Such an ideology would anoint the select few for the exploitation of the many. But a few do indeed rise.

The videomakers to be discussed here are attempting to re-direct their privileged roles *against* neoliberalism. This is not to say that the people discussed here are living lushly or wallowing in wealth, but they nonetheless remain at the top of the labor pyramid that provides them with the resources (including financial, racial, and/or gender privileges) and independence to engage in unpaid and/or lowly subsidized creative work.

Aside from distributing their videos through their own websites and digital distribution platforms like Vimeo, many of the activist videomakers sell their materials to both independent and commercial producers. Free Speech TV (FSTV), Grit TV, Link TV, and Democracy Now! have paid small amounts for either raw footage or pre-produced segments. For example, FSTV paid \$150 for a speech for its keynote series where a videographer would cover a highly desirable speaker. According to activist videographer Jeff Keating,

“Sometimes I would ask them if they wanted me to shoot certain things. There was never a question of getting approval normally. Green festivals were also very productive. They always had a good list of speakers. I would go to certain things that other people weren’t covering. I would stay with friends and get in free as a reporter. I could cover all my expenses but not make any money out of it. But at least I wasn’t going into the hole.”[90]

Making a living from such low-paid work is dubious for most videomakers unless they are willing to minimize cost-of-living expenses, share

resources, and often room with others.

However, with the downturn of the economy such work became even more precarious as nominal payments for such footage were either severely reduced or eliminated altogether. Although some outlets like FSTV have re-instituted such payments, they remain relatively low. People like Keating continue to work, but at a much more irregular pace than before.

Other videomakers sell footage to broadcast television and independent media outlets. Brandon Jourdan has sold footage to FSTV, Democracy Now!, Grit TV, and the like. But he also notes,

“I have contributed to *The New York Times*, Reuters, and *Huffington Post*. As a freelancer you don’t have to compromise. I tipped off a journalist from *The New York Times* about the New School student protests in 2008. I have caught stuff that other media hasn’t. This allows me to sell footage that others want. I don’t feel you should limit yourself to one outlet.”[91]

This flexible, piece-meal way of working has become a staple of the new economy where jobs remain temporary and benefits largely nonexistent. And, as Andrew Ross has shown, white male workers tend to most highly value such working conditions:

“Disproportionately white (90.6 percent) and male (66.2 percent), they were more likely to prefer their employment arrangements than any other workers in this category....”[92]

Therefore, Jourdan’s preference for his work is not surprising since it mirrors a general privilege that many white, male creatives share. Yet unlike the super creative class that Florida speaks of, most activist videomakers earn meager salaries from their work, if that. Most normally have to supplement their incomes with other jobs and rely on the goodwill of others for free housing and food during an assigned project. Their preferences for such work often derive less from direct material benefits (though building their resume can lead to future work and potentially higher salaries) than a freedom to engage in a type of creative political work that is meaningful to them.

To give a specific example, Brandon Jourdan’s video, *Occupied Berkeley* (2009), provides a look into how independent production works and the vexed relations between mediamakers’ anarchist affinities and neoliberal practices. While shooting short videos for the Yes Men[93] and waiting to fly out to Copenhagen to film the direct-actions against the COP 16[94], Jourdan heard about the planning of a student strike and direct-action to occupy Wheeler Hall on Berkeley’s campus to protest the tuition hikes, the firing of janitorial staff, and the general defunding of the public university system by the state. Jourdan recounts, “I decided to take that week to go to Berkeley and told Democracy Now! that something would happen. I got the nod from them that they would buy it for the show.” Dave Martinez, co-producer and cameraman of *Occupied Berkeley*, also had connections with independent producers back in New York City through his contributing to various Deep Dish TV series. Due to the makers’ connections and proven track record, Democracy Now! felt assured in the quality of the production and its timeliness.

Martinez’s and Jourdan’s relations with Democracy Now! are not all that different from many below-the-line videographers’ relations to commercial

production outlets that Vicki Mayer chronicles in *Below the Line*. She notes how since the 1970s

“the casualization of television work, from its outsourcing of tasks to nonguild members who deferred benefits to its reliance on multitasking entrepreneurs to drive down labor costs, had fragmented reliable work routines, rerouted career paths, and divorced professionalism from its assumed material benefits.”[95]

This neoliberal restructuring of media production, as we can see, has impacted all levels of independent video production whether it be for progressive causes or the commercial industry.

Because such job uncertainty and lack of benefits plagues independent videographers, they tend to recoup their losses in what Mayer has referred to as the surplus value of identities. For example, the soft-core videographers she interviewed spoke about and fetishized technology as a way to reassert their masculinity.[96] Similarly, activist videomakers, who are mostly men, also tend to recoup their sense of professionalism and masculinity in recounting the danger of the actions they cover, their arrests, and the general mayhem where they had to maintain courage under fire. This is not to claim that their accounts are disingenuous. But it is to suggest that within a neoliberal economy the stories we recount about ourselves do not simply transparently reveal something about our inner beliefs. They also serve as self-promotion and branding as these videomakers jockey for future jobs, career paths, and professional encounters. They both express the videomakers’ beliefs and become a calling card for future employment. It remains difficult, if not impossible, to differentiate insight from salesmanship in such a context, since the videomakers’ self-narratives are intimately intertwined with their careers.

Returning back to my analysis of *Occupied Berkeley*, Jourdan and Martinez arrived early in the morning at Wheeler Hall. According to Jourdan,

“I told the students I was working for Democracy Now! and asked them if they would mind if I could go in with them. Some of the kids were nervous. They covered their faces and worried that they would be identified in leading the occupation.”

While Jourdan was filming inside, Martinez filmed the occupation from the outside. Jourdan called *The New York Times* and various California papers to say that a journalist was inside, hoping that a mainstream news presence might deter or at least mitigate police violence and harassment. Jourdan recounts,

“I was throwing my DV tapes outside the window to Martinez so the cops wouldn’t take them. When the police eventually entered, I was arrested with a small infraction and then released.”

Occupied Berkeley attests to Jourdan’s and Martinez’s skill. It is a rather precise and engaging video made in a short turnaround time. The video begins with a low-end, ominous riff as titles establish the location, event, and main issues:

“On November 18th, the regents of the University of California voted to raise undergraduate tuition 32 percent. The regents’



Brandon Jourdan’s and David Martinez’s 2009 video *Occupied Berkeley* about the student occupation of Wheeler Hall against inflated tuition hikes and layoffs on campus. Like AIDS direct-action videos, it also focuses on the processes behind the occupation more than the confrontation with police. Here a black-clad anarchist participant speaks about the reasons behind the occupation.



Students in solidarity with those occupying Wheeler Hall. The student revolts occurring in California were a part of a larger movement exploding across the United States and the globe in countries like England, Canada, Italy, France, Greece, Chile, and Tunisia from 2009 to 2013. (*Occupied Berkeley*)

new budget plan would also mean the layoffs of workers and furloughs throughout the state of California.”

An establishing shot of Wheeler Hall follows, the site of the occupation. We see a U-lock clasped across door handles and chairs stacked-up as further barricades. Already we have the unique vision of seeing the occupation from the inside.

Students efficiently and effectively explain their situation. A masked student states,

“It’s not only about students, but it is about faculty members. It’s about workers. It’s about all of us being fed up with this crisis in priorities. They say it’s a financial crisis. But that is not the truth. It’s what they value and honor in the education system that’s the problem. We’re fighting for a public good.”

A young, black clad woman wearing a bandanna over the lower-half of her face lists the students demands: rehiring of the 38 fired workers, a \$1 lease for the student co-op, a fair contract for the only immigrant-owned business on campus, and rejection of the tuition hike.

Her dress, furthermore, signifies a Black Bloc alliance. The Black Bloc is not an organization but an anarchist protest tactic. It produces an affinity group of black clad individuals with their faces covered who engage in aggressive direct-actions such as property destruction or in this case the forced occupation of a building. The students’ tactics and dress suggest their anarchist affinities regardless if all of them are aware of this or not. Yet they are applying such tactics to defend the integrity of a state institution—something self-identified anarchists are supposed to oppose since the state is often viewed one-dimensionally as a site of oppression—thus revealing a hybrid political approach at work.

The piece keeps the confrontation with the police outside of the hall to a visual minimum, not unlike the direct-action videos of ACT UP. A photomontage of students blocking cars and being dragged by the police follows. We then witness a brief moment of the police beating a protestor relentlessly. But the video quickly shifts back inside Wheeler Hall to emphasize negotiations and how a sympathetic faculty member would like to enter the hall with the chief of police. The students instead suggest that negotiations be brought outside so “the rest of the students, faculty workers that are outside can participate in the conversation as well,” as one student explains. Such a comment, once again, reveals the students’ anarchist inclinations to involve all participants into the process by creating a nonhierarchical space. This sequence also conveys Jourdan and Martinez’s care and skill in not allowing the students’ issues and strategies to ever get lost among depictions of police repression. Violence never supplants the core issues, which all-too-often happens within activist videos. Like the earlier ACT UP direct-action videos, the piece emphasizes anarchist-inflected processes as much as it does protestors’ demands by the makers’ embedding at least one camera with the students. Not only do the students’ demands challenge the neoliberal assumptions guiding public education in California, but they also model the type of nonhierarchical relationships that the bureaucracy of university life implicitly rejects.

During the last two minutes, the film documents the police’s invasion into the hall. One could say it is the riot porn section of the video.[97] However, watching the police breaking down the doors and then seeing the camera



Students determining by consensus to reject the entrance of faculty into the building. Instead they hold open talks outside so all can participate, modelling their anarchist-inflected practices against the hierarchical, secretive models of university administration. (*Occupied Berkeley*)



The cops invade the building. Jourdan’s camerawork allies itself with the students by standing on their side, but it also serves as a deterrent to police brutality by standing defiantly up from the students to document officers’ actions against the students. (*Occupied Berkeley*)



Although *Occupied Berkeley* visually and narratively minimizes the confrontation with police to instead highlight the reasons behind

the occupation and anarchist-inflected student practices, the police's attack on students went viral across the internet.

swing from the doors and running with the students inside the hall for safety provides stunning, rare footage. Compared to the rest of the video's well-framed footage, the camera temporarily loses control, shooting wildly, embodying the panic that has gripped the students. The camera joins the students in hiding in the back of a classroom. The framing shakes as the camera is jostled by the overflowing bodies entering the room. The camera frantically scopes the room before focusing upon the squatting students. Finally, the filming regains composure and steadily frames the door as the police enter.

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This type of activist camerawork is significant in the way it situates itself differently from traditional documentary form by further stressing the type of embodied immediacy that Roger Hallas identified operating in direct-action AIDS activist videos. As Patricia Zimmerman notes, this on-the-ground type style of filmmaking

“constitutes a political strategy that expands the nature of committed or guerrilla filmmaking into a joint effort between social actors and the action of image making.”[98]
[\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

We witness this uniting of political action and image making most dramatically as the camera runs for cover and is jostled by the other student bodies. When the camera positions itself to steadily focus on the classroom door as the police enter, it is not just documenting an event, but also moderating the police’s behavior. Filming itself becomes an intervention made explicit by Jourdan’s refusing to sit on the floor with the other protestors. Because Jourdan remains standing, the camera holds a somewhat defiant position that visually locates itself literally on the side of the protestors while at the same time carving out an optimum viewpoint from which to observe how the protestors are being treated by the police. This moment clearly represents the different but related registers of the space of the videomaking and the space of the political. The video, as a result, not only captures the affective dimensions of a student group being invaded by the police, but also provides a direct intervention during the moment of confrontation between students and police.

Jourdan, like many other videographers, is highly aware of the importance of aesthetics in situating audiences. He speaks of his own aesthetic:

“One thing that is also important for people making independent types of media: too often the flaw is the story of the battle dominating over the battle of the story. We need to frame our videos in progressive terms rather than reactionary ones. Alternative media is at its best in its ability to innovate storytelling.”[99]

This wider framing of the battle of the story is abundantly clear in how *Occupied Berkeley* establishes the main issues at its beginning, assuming that its audience might be unfamiliar with them and tracing how these concerns relate to California as a whole. Furthermore, the video effectively minimizes its focus on police repression by maintaining primary focus on the students’ issues, tactics and strategies.

Yet in spite of all this careful framing and well-crafted editing, the video went viral. Jourdan complains,

“I get frustrated in the fact that the footage that went viral was the police brutality rather than the message of the students holding up in Berkeley. This somehow gets overlooked.”

This observation hints at a larger dilemma in social justice media: how might videomakers be able to counter the simplification of their content into nothing more than riot porn when it is distributed? Furthermore, it questions why riot porn tends to trump other material rather than simply co-exist with it.

The popularity of the most violent imagery of *Occupied Berkeley* speaks to an even older problem of spectacle-based activism: how does one prevent one's message from being co-opted and distorted? The Black Panthers provide an illuminating example here. Although they engaged in many mundane but essential tasks like supplying food, childcare, transportation, and education to the community, their image of being armed and standing in formation predominated in mainstream media. At the same time, as T.V. Reed explains, however, such imagery should not simply be dismissed as an empty theatrical stunt. He writes,

“While to many the Panthers may have seemed to be engaging in mere posturing, to many others their revolutionary posture spoke volumes about no longer knuckling under to white power. Those people may not have believed that a revolution was at hand, but they got the message that only a new kind of black person would dare even to speak revolution to the white world.”[100]

A more serious problem arises, though, when such imagery not only trumps activists' other actions but also further draws down police and government repression and violence. The Black Panthers' confrontational imagery and attitude helped lead to the untimely deaths of many of their members by bolstering white prejudices already held by many police and government officials. This reliance upon a spectacle of confrontation might energize some viewers to join such movements or engage in sympathetic actions. But such imagery comes at a high price of drawing further police and government infiltration and violence that exacerbates the internal tensions within such groups and accelerates their dissolution as it had done for the Black Panthers and would later impact eco-activists during the 1990s and 2000s after the Earth Liberation Front engaged in the dubious tactics of arson against environmentally unsound organizations and drew immense federal scrutiny and repression against much of the environmental movement.[101]

What *Occupied Berkeley* further adds is that even producing one's own independent media doesn't prevent its more sensationalistic aspects from being distorted and over-emphasized as it is distributed over the web. It exposes the limits of such media in reaching wider audiences in its original form. And it begs the question if such fetishization can ever be avoided if viewers desire that kind of spectacle—regardless of whether such desires are conditioned by the commercial media and/or speak to more innate human tendencies or both.

As this brief example shows, the practices of activist videomakers are complicated and at times contradictory. Although clearly allied with the students in defending affordable higher education, Jordan's reliance upon a career of independent videomaking nonetheless engages in neoliberal practices that actually challenge the very existence of state support. Although one does not want to overplay the significance of one progressive videomaker's actions as simply supporting a neoliberal world view, they gesture towards the contradictory terrain such activist media-makers must negotiate as they level their skills against capitalist practices that they are

also implicated within. Similarly, Democracy Now!, which provides a viable distribution platform for *Occupied Berkeley* to be viewed by the progressive community, relies upon the very practices of outsourcing below-the-line video-makers that we also see operating in commercial productions. In other words, the political economy of activist media-making tends to problematize in part the progressive material being filmed. Here neoliberal networks and anarchist affinities converge into a twisted terrain of hybrid practices. As opposed to the rhetoric that often posits neoliberalism and anarchism as mutually exclusive, we can see their affinities and relations—without suggesting that they are identical.

Occupy Wall Street and the anarchist imaginary

Occupy Wall Street (OWS) offers a more recent example of how neoliberal inequities can be perpetuated when anarchist-inflected practices are uncritically adopted. Although it never announced itself as anarchist, OWS adhered to many anarchist-inflected practices such as holding General Assemblies (GA) based upon consensus-based decision-making, direct-action protest and organizing, and attempts at nonhierarchical relations. Many positive things emerged from the Occupy movement, such as shifting national attention back to issues of poverty and inequality, exposing police violence, yet again, to global audiences, and rejuvenating ties and a sense of agency among activists and those interested in social justice. But as the dust settled on OWS, much critique has also arisen regarding the dysfunction and inequities perpetuated by its anarchist tendencies and liberal outlook. Todd Gitlin recalls sitting through numerous General Assemblies where class and racial tensions flared among a sea of confused working groups lacking any direction.[102] According to many participants, Zuccotti Park, the site of the occupation, self-segregated along class lines with middle-class member occupying its east end and its more lower-class members at its west, exposing how divisions within the 99% persisted.[103]



Occupy Wall Street (OWS) videos like *Where Do We Go From Here* implies that racism has been eliminated within the movement by superficially incorporating diverse participants into its frame. OWS's General Assembly, however, was consistently run by white men, as stressed by the People of Color Working Group.

In spite of individual appeals for equity, informal leaders arose who often held privileged racial and class status. In Zuccotti Park, A Call to People of Color was issued on October 1, 2011 by the People of Color Working Group after observing the prevailing whiteness of the General Assemblies. In it, the working group asserted, “This monumental movement risks replicating the very structures of injustice it seeks to eliminate. And so we are actively working to unite the diverse voices of all communities, in order to understand exactly what is at stake, and to demand that a movement to end economic injustice must have at its core an honest struggle to end racism,” which OWS never did.[104]



Superficial comparisons between OWS and the civil rights movement punctuates *Where Do We Go From Here*, giving it a sanctimonious and smug feel. Tellingly, the video provides white men the most time to express their views.

Furthermore, the GA obscured the informal hierarchies and working relations that actually determined OWS actions by falsely asserting itself as the primary forum for such decision-making. As the collective Not an Alternative, whose founders had been a part of the alter-globalization movement, address [105]:

“Rarely were actions the product of GA decisions. Instead, they were organized by independent groups skirting around the GA structure, acting in the name of principles. Had autonomous groups waited on the GA to make decisions, the actions and encampments across the county would never have emerged.”[106]

The videos produced by OWS also emerged from such informal channels



Where Do We Go From Here ends with a series of participants breaking the fourth wall, imploring viewers to join their cult/cause as ethereal music plays over their images.



Malik Rhassan created this *Occupy the Hood* video to address the lack of representation of poor people of color within OWS. Unlike *Where Do We Go From Here*, *Occupy the Hood* possesses no background music, minimizes editing, and utilizes a handheld camera, revealing the material inequities that underlie its making.

and reflected many of these racial and class privileges of the people who created them. This became most apparent during the livestreaming of events that those with privilege often saw as indicating “transparency.” At the same time that the videomakers streamed material publicly, many people of color and transgendered and queer people felt uncomfortable being filmed and streamed since their image’s transmission made them felt exposed and vulnerable. Furthermore, those narrating the livestreams, often white and male, started to achieve a celebrity that opposed OWS’s nonhierarchical aspirations.[107]

Most of the videos produced by OWS seem based on a vague liberal impulse that refused to engage with structural inequities that the People of Color Working Group cited by instead bathing in a New Age aura that celebrates individuality. *Where Do We Go From Here* (<http://vimeo.com/30778727>), for instance, opens with synthetic ethereal music. The camera smoothly floats across the screen capturing attractive and diverse participants—young and old, black and white, male and female — speaking to one another, determinedly typing on laptops, and providing food. Periodically, someone spouts a hollow aphorism: “It kind’a feels like something is finally being done. Like people are waking up”—or a worn-out Civil Rights cliché: “When Rosa Parks refused to give-up her seat on the bus...no one knew that four years later there would be a comprehensive Civil Rights Act.”

The video’s sanctimonious feel—established through its semi-religious music, floating camera movements, and hollow rhetoric—can be off-putting. It presents those depicted within it as the anointed and leaves the rest of us less pious rabble watching from the outside in the cold. It possesses an oppressive inclusivity that smothers us by its ever-present wind music and beautified participants, who imploringly stare out at us during its conclusion. The video makes OWS seem more like a cult than a diverse movement, more therapy than politics, a United Colors of Benetton commercial rather than a documentary seriously engaging with structural disenfranchisement. It reinforces Todd Gitlin’s observation that

“many were the ways in which the movement could come to feel that its primary achievement was itself—a sort of collective narcissism.”[108]

Such videos’ effacing of actual inequities led some people of color to produce their own videos in response. In *Occupy the Hood* (<http://vimeo.com/30146870>), Malik Rhassan, from Queens, states how people of color were underrepresented at OWS even though Wall Street practices have been negatively impacting communities of color for decades. He notes,

“If the white community has a cold, we have the flu. So what I did was I went on the Internet and made a Twitter as a sounding board, and it worked.”

Rhassan’s style is much more minimal than in other OWS videos. The visuals largely consist of a two-shot of Malik and another African-American male with a red Che Guevara shirt speaking before a handheld camera. The camera swivels a bit to gaze upon other participants. Malik relates a series of useful information directly to the camera: “And they stopped the welfare and they stopped food stamps on October first in Detroit.” An occasional photograph of protestors and famous supporters like Cornel West is interspersed in the mere three minutes of footage.



As we watch people standing in a food line, Malik comments: "They're feeding more people here than my mayor feeds." (*Occupy the Hood*)



Occupy the Hood states that poor people of color have been occupied for centuries. Malik stresses: "Wall Street has been built upon slave bones" (*Occupy the Hood*). Despite such appeals by minority communities, OWS never significantly addressed or engaged with historically disenfranchised communities. Its liberal and anarchist-inflected practices failed to acknowledge the structural racism that pervades capitalism and activist structures like itself. Although it turned the national debate to issues of poverty and economic inequality, OWS never deepened its analyses to explore in a sustained fashion how gender, racial, and sexual discrimination accompanied such class issues.

Malik asserts, "We've been occupied for years. Wall Street has been built upon slave bones." A shot of a flag waving "Debt is Slavery" follows showing the linkages between the metaphor and the historical reality. He continues, "They're feeding more people here than my mayor feeds." The camera turns around to show a table of food being dished out to a line of people. The camera zooms in on some apples, bread, condiments, and boxes of additional supplies. The other man adds as the camera swivels back, the sound of his voice fades-in as the camera's mic returns to him:

"I want to thank all the people who have donated to OWS. If it wasn't for you guys keep on funding it, keep on donating, keep on sending clothes, sock, shoes, tampons and Tampax for the ladies, toothbrushes, toothpaste, soap, a lot of things wouldn't be possible. We just blessed."

A sense of urgency pervades the sequence not only in the amount of information mentioned, but also through the rough camera-style that frantically scans the backdrop while simultaneously trying to focus upon the two speakers. The camera tries to ingest as much as possible in a very limited amount of time. Furthermore, the sequence's rather spotty sound and minimal editing suggests that its makers do not have much familiarity with video production but are nonetheless jumping into it since the moment requires it.

The minimal production style speaks to the poverty and neglect that have suffused urban, working-class communities. The video lacks the music, smooth editing, and general gloss found in other OWS shorts. Unlike the New Age demeanor of *Where Do We Go From Here* with its moderate pacing and smooth camera movements that imply the socio-economic privilege that informs the video's very form, *Occupy the Hood* captures within its shaky camera movements, choppy editing, and shorter length a more amateur approach employed by someone who has been more versed in the ways of YouTube videos than formally trained at film school.

These two videos represent some of the advances and setbacks that still relate to anarchist-inflected video activism. The lower costs of technology and accessibility of new distribution platforms have allowed historically disenfranchised people like Malik more access to video production than ever before. So after witnessing the racial privilege that predominated throughout the GA and the failure of its organizers to address it, Malik could return to Queens and make videos with his friends that forced such issues to be addressed and get publicized in the media. But those with racial and class privileges continue to make more, longer, more professionally produced, and often better publicized videos, which can at times remain blissfully unaware of these structural inequities that make such videos possible in the first place by celebrating an abstract individualism that haunts both anarchist and liberal outlooks. Furthermore, those with privilege are more likely to have their videos distributed in highly visible venues not only since they often hold connections to the gatekeepers of such venues like that of activist film festivals and public broadcasting, but the "more professional" quality of their videos often appeals to the aesthetic biases of such gatekeepers that make distribution possible.

Because OWS relied both upon anarchist-inflected practices and a vague liberalism that failed to explore how such outlooks are premised upon implicitly informal exclusionary and hierarchical practices—even when

people of color repeatedly state so—it couldn't help but alienate itself from a majority of working-class and minority communities. For example, even though the occupation of Zuccotti Park bordered Chinatown, one of the last remaining poor immigrant communities in Manhattan, no attempts were made by OWS organizers to create a neighboring community alliance.[109] Not surprisingly, early demographic assessment of the Occupy movement as a whole suggests that it was largely white, college educated, and youthful—with women slightly outnumbering men.[110]

Conclusion

This brief historical overview of U.S. anarchist-inflected video practices exposes both the limits and possibilities that undergird them. By addressing anarchism, we can better see the interconnections not only between various video activist formations and their historical trajectory, but also their relations to neoliberal networks and the inequities these groups sometimes perpetuate. Regardless of how one might feel about anarchism, anarchist-based affinities and practices run throughout much U.S. video activism. By failing to acknowledge this long-running underpinning of video activism, we remain blinded to a vast network of individuals and collectives struggling against the gross inequities produced by neoliberalism and its concentrations of wealth. Although their struggles might not be perfect and replicate some of the very injustices they are attempting to overcome, these video activists represent an important part of the mediascape and their working processes have still remained under-analyzed. This essay offers an initial foray into the topic in order to encourage further discussion. It is time that anarchism becomes a frame of reference to understand contemporary video and media activism.

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Notes

1. Sergei Eisenstein, "The Problem of the Materialist Approach to Form," in *Eisenstein's Writings, 1922-1934*. Ed. Richard Taylor. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 62. [[return to page 1](#)]

2. Alexandra Juhasz, *AIDS TV: Identity, Community, and Alternative Video* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995); Deirdre Boyle, *Subject to Change: Guerrilla Television Revisited* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Dorothy Kidd, "Indymedia.org: A New Communications Commons," in *Cyberactivism: Online Activism in Theory and Practice*. Eds. Martha McCaughey and Michael D. Ayers (New York: Routledge), 47-69; Dorothy Kidd, "Whistling Into the Typhoon: A Radical Inquiry into Autonomous Media," in *Uses of a Whirlwind: Movement, Movements, and Contemporary Radical Currents in the United States*. Ed. Team Colors Collective. (Oakland: AK Press, 2010), 199-210; and Clemencia Rodriguez, *Fissures in the Mediascape: An International Study of Citizens' Media* (New Jersey: Hampton Press, 2001).

3. David James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 23.

4. Uri Gordon, *Anarchy Alive! Anti-Authoritarian Politics from Practice and Theory* (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 41.

5. John Downing, *Radical Media: The Political Experience of Alternative Communication* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1984), 18-22.

6. Of course, these groups had their own contradictory tendencies that can most clearly be seen in SDS's *Port Huron Statement* where democratic reformism wars with a radical democratic vision. As Todd Gitlin observed, SDS, along with most New Left groups at the time, held a split vision "between the rhetoric of the desirable and the agenda of the attainable" (Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), 114). Also see Gregory Nevala Calvert, "Democratic Idealism: SDS and the Gospel of Participatory Democracy," in *The New Left: Legacy and Continuity*. Ed. Dimitrios Roussopoulos (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 2007), 105-129.

7. Francesca Polletta, *Freedom Is an Endless Meeting: Democracy in American Social Movements* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 57.

8. Barbara Epstein, *Political Protest and Cultural Revolution: Nonviolence Direct-action in the 1970s and 1980s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 23.
9. Ibid.
10. Julie Stephens, *Anti-Disciplinary Protest: Sixties Radicalism and Postmodernism* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 4.
11. Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture* (New York: Anchor Books, 1969), 57-58.
12. Murray Bookchin, *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2004), viii.
13. See Boyle, *Subject to Change: Guerrilla Television Revisited* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
14. Bookchin, "Towards a Liberatory Technology," in *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*, 48.
15. Ibid., 80.
16. Ibid., 80-81.
17. Ibid., 81.
18. Murray Bookchin, "Social Ecology," in *The Murray Bookchin Reader*. Ed. Janet Biehl (London: Black Rose Press, 1999), 32.
19. Editorial, *Radical Software* 1 (1970), 2.
20. Jon Burris, "Did the Portapak Cause Video Art? Notes on the Formation of A New Medium," *Experimental Television Center website* (originally in *Millennium Film Journalism* 29 (1996): <http://www.experimentaltvcenter.org/did-portapak-cause-video-art-notes-formation-new-medium>).
22. See Boyle, *Subject to Change*, 14-25.
22. Parry Teasdale, *Videofreex: America's First Pirate TV Station and the Catskills Collective that Turned It On* (Hensonville, NY: Black Dome), 17.
23. Ibid.
24. David Cort interview with Deirdre Boyle, November 9, 1983, *Guerrilla TV Archives*, Series IV, Box 6, Folder 237.
25. Gerd Stern, "Support of Television Arts by Public Funding: The New York State Council on the Arts," in *The New Television: A Public/Private Art*. Eds. Douglas Davis and Allison Simmons (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1977), 143.
26. Ibid., 151. [[return to page 2](#)]

27. Ben Levine, People's Video Theatre, interview with Deidre Boyle, November 1, 1984, *Guerilla Television Archive*, Series 1, Box 1, Folder 2.
28. *The Sixties*, 349.
29. Nancy Cain, *Video Days and What We Saw Through the Viewfinder* (Palm Spring, CA: Event Horizon Press, 2011), 46.
30. See Epstein, *Political Protest*.
31. Craig O' Hara, *The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 1999), 71.
32. David DeLeon, *The American as Anarchist: Reflections on Indigenous Radicalism* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), 120.
33. The Red Scare was initiated in 1917 by government raids on International Workers of the World's headquarters across the nation and culminated in the Palmer Raids of 1920 where thousands of radicals were arrested as due process and habeas corpus were suspended. In regards to the negative impact of McCarthyism on the New Left, see John Downing, *Radical Media*, 48-49.
34. DeLeon, 132.
35. Laura Portwood-Stacer, *Lifestyle Politics and Radical Activism* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 145-46.
36. Profane Existence, *Making Punk a Threat Again!* (Oakland, CA: Loin Cloth Press, 1997), 36.
37. "Music as a Weapon: The Contentious Symbiosis of Punk Rock and Anarchism," *Rolling Thunder* (Spring 2009): 72.
38. For example see *Punk Planet* 38 (July/August 2000) dedicated to "voices of the New Left."
39. My observations are based upon over a hundred of hours of interviews I have conducted with North American media activists over the prior five years.
40. For more information on Media Mobilizing Project see Peter Funke, Chris Robé, and Todd Wolfson, "Suturing Working Class Subjectivities: Media Mobilizing Project and the Role of Media Building a Class-Based Social Movement, *Triple C: Communication, Capitalism, and Critique* 10, no. 1 (2012): <http://www.triple-c.at/index.php/tripleC/article/view/289/324>
41. For some of these debates see Aragorn, ed. *Occupy Everything!: Anarchists in the Occupy Movement, 2009-2011* (Oakland, CA: LBC Books, 2012).
42. John Downing, *Radical Media: Rebellious Communication and Social Movements* (Trinity Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001), 44.

43. Melanie La Rosa, "Early Video Pioneer: An Interview with Skip Blumberg," *Journal of Film and Video* 64, no. 1-2 (Spring/Summer 2012): 38.
44. Jean Baudrillard, "Requiem for the Media," in *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation*, ed. John G Hanhardt (New York: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1987), 139.
45. Portwood-Stacer, 145-46.
46. Madhava, "Reclaim the Streets, Reclaim the Code," *Punk Planet* May/June 2001), 103.
47. Mariarosa Della Costa and Selma James, *Women and the Subversion of Community* (London: Falling Wall Press, 1972), 33.
48. Ibid., 35.
49. Leopoldina Fortunati, *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor and Capital*. Trans. Hilary Creek (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 1995), 8.
50. Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012), 48.
51. Bmedia email, 31 July 2004,
<http://lists.indymedia.org/pipermail/imc-satellite/2004-July/0801-k9.html> (accessed 12 February 2010).
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52. Quoted in Todd Wolfson, "From the Zapatistas to Indymedia: Dialectics and Orthodoxy in Contemporary Social Movements" *Communication, Culture and Critique* 5 (2012): 153.
53. Of course, AIDS activism from groups like Gay Men's Health Crisis and the National Gay Task Force precedes ACT UP but often gets effaced from histories due to its lack of spectacle-based actions, which, reluctantly, will be done here due to my focus on direct-action AIDS activist videos. For this earlier history see Deborah B. Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight Against AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), Chapter One. Earlier movements like that relating to civil rights and feminism also dramatically revealed the links between bodily action and signification, too.
54. Simon Watney, *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS, and the Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 3.
55. Ibid., 86.
56. About this reluctance see Greg Bordowitz, *The AIDS Crisis is Ridiculous and Other Writings, 1986-2003* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 29.
57. Greg Bordowitz, *The AIDS Crisis is Ridiculous and Other Writings, 1986-2003* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 50-51.

58. Alexandra Juhasz, *AIDS TV: Identity, Community, and Alternative Video* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 60; Greg Bordowitz interview with Sarah Schulman, December 17, 2002, ACTUP Oral History Project, <<http://www.actuporalhistory.org/interviews/images/bordowitz.pdf>>, 14.
59. DeeDee Halleck, *Hand-Held Visions: The Impossible Possibilities of Community Media* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 117.
60. Catherine Saalfeld, "On the Make: Activist Video Collectives," in *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video*. Eds. Martha Gever, John Greyson, and Pratibha Parmar (New York: Routledge, 1993), 24.
61. Halleck, 118.
62. Ibid., 119.
63. Ibid., 121.
64. Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 175.
65. Ibid., 175-76.
66. Deborah B. Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight Against AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 66.
67. Bordowitz, 56.
68. Quoted in Catherine Saalfeld, "On the Make," 27.
69. Robyn Hutt interview with Sarah Schulman, June 25, 2008, ACT UP Oral History Project.
70. Affinity groups emerged out of anarchist practices during the Spanish Civil War. They refer to small semi-autonomous groups that often work within larger movements. ACT UP primarily operated through affinity groups. Although ACT UP would hold its general meeting on Monday nights, its affinity groups like Treatments Action Group, Media Committee, DIVA TV, and Women's Caucus, to name only a few, met other nights of the week. Much of the work in building consensus during the Monday night meeting was done beforehand during these other meetings.
71. John Greyson identifies nine different forms of AIDS tapes from cable access shows to experimental critiques of mass media. But the direct-action videos to be discussed here play a central role in influencing future U.S. activist street tapes, most notably that of the alter-globalization movement.
72. Roger Hallas, *Reframing Bodies: AIDS, Bearing Witness, and the Queer Moving Image* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 88.
73. John Greyson, "Strategic Compromises: AIDS and Alternative Video Practices," in *Reimagining America: The Arts of Social Change*. Eds. Mark O'Brien and Craig Little (Philadelphia, PA: New Society Publishers, 1990), 70.

74. Patricia Zimmerman, *States of Emergency: Documentaries, War, Democracies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 91.
75. Hallas, 90.
76. Saalfeld, 29.
77. Hallas, 91.
78. Jeffrey Juris, *Network Futures: The Movement Against Corporate Globalization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 21, 124.
79. Jane M. Gaines, "Political Mimesis," in *Collecting Visible Evidence*. Eds. Michael Renov and Jane M. Gaines (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 91.
80. Saalfeld, 26.
81. Quoted in Cvetkovich, 180. [[return to page 4](#)]
82. Ibid., 71.
83. Deborah B. Gould, "ACT UP, Racism, and the Question of How to Use History," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 98, no. 1 (2012): 59.
84. Ibid., 182.
85. Groups like Philadelphia's Media Mobilizing Project (MMP) and the Canadian Media Co-Op are recent attempts to integrate some anarchist-inflected structures with more structural analysis and support for marginalized communities like African-Americans, Hispanics, the poor, and indigenous groups. For more information on MMP see Peter N. Funke, Chris Robé, and Todd Wolfson, "Suturing Working Class Subjectivities: Media Mobilizing Project and the Role of Media Building a Class-Cased Social Movement," *Triple C: Communication, Capitalism, Critique* 10, no.1 (2012): <http://www.triple-c.at/index.php/tripleC/article/view/289/324>.
86. Hallas, 105.
87. Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (Basic Books: New York, 2002), 69.
88. Ibid., 6.
89. Andrew Ross, *Nice Work If You Can Get It: Life and Labor in Precarious Times* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 41.
90. Jeff Keating phone interview, 20 July 2010.
91. Brandon Jourdan interview, 7 July 2010. All subsequent quotes from Jordan will come from this interview.
92. Andrew Ross, *No-Collar: The Humane Workplace and Its Hidden Costs*

(New York: Basic Books, 2003), 158.

93. The Yes Men are Andy Bichlbaum and Igor Vamos who engage in various theatrical stunts to expose the irrationality of capitalism and the utopian hopes that remain just beyond its purview. Such stunts include posing as entrepreneurs who recycle shit into fast food and impersonating Canadian government officials to claim that its government is dramatically decreasing emissions.

94. COP 16 is shorthand for the 16th United Nations Climate Change Conference held in Cancun, Mexico in 2010.

95. Vicki Mayer, *Below the Line: Producers and Production Studies in the New Television Economy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 67.

96. Ibid., 81-82.

97. Activists themselves have self-mockingly deemed protest footage as riot porn. It gets the viewer off as if he/she is part of the event without ever having to leave the comfort of his/her couch.

98. Zimmerman, 95. [[return to page 5](#)]

99. The group *smartMeme* more thoroughly addresses the notion of the battle of the story in their book by Patrick Reinsborough and Doyle Channing, *Re:Imagining Change: How to Use Story-Based Strategy to Win Campaigns, Build Movements, and Change the World* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2010).

100. T.V. Reed, *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Streets of Seattle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 57.

101. For more information see Will Potter, *Green Is the New Red: An Insider's Account of a Social Movement Under Siege* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2011).

102. Todd Gitlin, *Occupy Nation: The Roots, The Spirit, and the Promise of Occupy Wall Street* (New York: Itbooks, 2012), 98-99.

103. Writers for the 99%, *Occupying Wall Street: The Inside Story of an Action that Changed America* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2011), 63.

104. Ibid., 114.

105. The alter-globalization movement emerged during the 1990s and culminated during the early 2000s. Significantly influenced by the 1994 Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, Mexico, the movement established global networks of resistance against neoliberal institutions like the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund and their environmentally unsound, workers unfriendly, sexist, etc. practices.

106. Not an Alternative, "Counter Power As Common Power," June 6, 2014:

<http://roarmag.org/2014/06/counter-power-as-common-power/>.

107. Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age* (Massachusetts: Polity, 2012), 176.

108. *Occupy Nation*, 94.

109. Audrea Lim, “Chinatown Is Nowhere,” in *Occupy! Scenes from an Occupied America*. Eds. Astra Taylor, Keith Cessen, and editors from *n+1*, *Dissent*, *Triple Canopy* and *The New Inquiry* (New York: Verso, 2011), 99-104.

110. *Networks of Outrage*, 167.

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The last word

John Hess, award for activism

John Hess, our co-editor since we started *Jump Cut* in 1974, has recently won an award by the New Faculty Majority (NFM), the leading organization seeking justice and equality for contingent faculty in higher education. As many in the United States now know, about two thirds of the classroom teachers in the U.S. academic world are working on limited contracts without the stability of any future security. Covered by different terms, including *lecturer, non-tenure-track, contingent, part-time, adjunct, visiting, temporary*, etc., these people teach most of the courses and most of the students in higher education today. John has been a pioneer in working for better conditions for such teachers and for gaining contractual fairness within faculty unions and with college and university employers. We're proud of John's achievement and quote the NFM press release below

Chuck Kleinhans
Julia Lesage

On November 17, 2014, what would have been our colleague and friend Steve Street's 59th birthday, NFM selected the first recipient of the Steve Street Award for Extraordinary Faculty Activism: JOHN HESS.

We invite you to read Joe Berry's eloquent statement below about John. The NFM Award Committee believes that the depth and breadth of John's work, carried out tirelessly across decades, merits recognition not only because of its quality and courage, but also because it is fitting for us to recognize those who have made the adjunct faculty movement possible. Like Steve, John's commitment to his teaching and scholarship has been as deep as his commitment to his activism. Like Steve, John has worked collectively and collaboratively within organizations and unions but has never been afraid to challenge them to do and be better.

Along with so many faculty working in contingent positions, John's work can only be characterized as "extraordinary"—all the more so for the extraordinarily challenging obstacles that he and all contingent faculty have faced and continue to face in order to serve their students and the profession of teaching. We at NFM believe that it is important to remember that the momentum that has been building steadily since our founding could only be happening because of the tireless work of people like John, whose work dates

back decades.

As Joe Berry has put it:

“John is probably the single individual most responsible, though certainly not alone, for the development of what many believe (including me) is the best collective bargaining agreement covering contingent faculty in the USA, negotiated by the California Faculty Association NEA/AAUP/SEIU [National Education Association/American Association of University Professors/Service Employees International Union], with the California State University system. He also has been active on the national stage: doing organizing trainings at COCAL [Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor, a three-country body—United States, Canada, Mexico—that sponsors a conferences every other year and also has a number of there projects on behalf of contingent academic labor], writing for AAUP’s *Academe* and co-authoring a chapter in the recent book *Equality for Contingent Faculty* (edited by Keith Hoeller) and, until his recent debilitating illness, had been an active participant on ADJ-L [ADJ-L is the COCAL list serve; name came from pre-COCAL name, Adjunct List] and, for a time, on the COCAL International Advisory Committee. He is currently engaged, with Joe Berry and Helena Worthen, in writing a book on the story of the lecturers’ [the name for Non-Tenure-Track faculty in the California State University system] struggle and how they achieved their present conditions.

John’s contributions to the contingent faculty movement reach from the 1970’s, when he started teaching at San Francisco State U in the Film Studies department in 1978. He was a wonderful teacher. (Personal note: I was a student of his in his first year teaching there when I was finishing my own MA.) Equally important, he quickly became a leading activist in the Part Time and Temporary Faculty committee of the United Professors of California, and its SFSU local, rising by 1981 to be the statewide chair as well as often leading the committee at SFSU. [UPC, United Professors of CA, was the other statewide union vying to represent CSU faculty. It was affiliated with AFT and was generally viewed as more progressive, militant, and pro-lecturer than CFA at the time.]

He also was the editor of the statewide lecturer’s newsletter. He helped to lead the lecturers’ efforts in the first collective bargaining elections in 1981-82 while he was also involved, with other lecturers, in pushing the FTTT [full time tenure track] leadership to be more responsive to lecturers concerns. The UPC lost the election, by a few dozen votes out of over 10,000 cast, and CFA, a smaller and non-AFL-CIO union, won largely because people who wanted no union voted for CFA. Nevertheless, John and other leaders convinced UPC activists to join CFA where they eventually took over the leadership themselves, much to the

benefit of the lecturers. He continued to work to build lecturers power in CFA and rose to again become the statewide leader of the Lecturers' Council in CFA.

Like hundreds of others, John was laid off in the 90s and, having finally finished his long-delayed Ph.D., largely based upon his founding co-editorship of the renowned film (now media) journal *Jump Cut*, he took a tenure-track job at Ithaca College in NY. After five years there, John took the opportunity to avoid the tenure process and return to Oakland with his spouse, Gail Sullivan, a union staff rep and organizer.

With a monumental change to a more activist and militant leadership in 1999, with almost total unanimous lecturer support, the new leadership soon hired John to be the staff support for a revitalized and increasingly resourced Lecturers Council. It was during this period after 2000 that the lecturers came to exercise their proper leadership in CFA and helped to lead the union to great contract improvements in job security, benefits and pay equity. They also helped to lead the whole fight to save the CSU system from the corporatizing influences that accompanied the cuts in state funding that had proceeded apace since the 1980's."

John is now quite ill with Parkinson's. We wish him comfort and healing, and honor and thank him for his work. Most important, we hope that he knows that the movement to which he has given so much of his life will never forget him.

Maria Maisto

President/Executive Director, New Faculty Majority Foundation

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Framegrabs from Kleinhans, *Back Porch*
(S8mm, silent, b&w and color, 1978-1984)
Click on image to see at larger size.



Linda Williams, Ruby Rich, Paul Fitzgerald,
Cheryll Hidalgo.



Cheryll Hidalgo, Russell Campbell, Julia
Lesage.



Michelle Citron

The last word— looking back, deliciously

by Chuck Kleinhans

Because 2014 was *Jump Cut*'s 40th year, we had some active nostalgic moments. We started the print publication with the crazy idea of having editors located over 2000 miles from each other. Julia and Chuck were in Chicago, and John Hess in Northern California. As we grew, editorial collectives formed in each place usually meeting Saturday afternoons to do everything from read submissions to layout the next issue to pack up copies for subscribers and book stores. These meetings often ended with a potluck meal for those who wanted to stay, or a trip to the hot tub (in Berkeley).

Meals together are, of course, a major human way of bonding, and rest on the foundational human need to eat. As Brecht put it, "Grub first, then Ethics" ["Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral."]

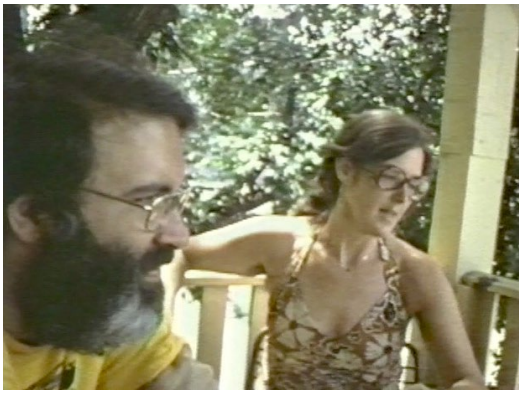
I'm always reminded of this when fresh local tomatoes arrive at the farmstand in late summer and I set about making spaghetti sauce the way that Linda Williams (now a professor of film at U of California Berkeley) showed me back in the day: core the stem out and stick a whole garlic clove in the hole, put some olive oil in the bottom of a heavy cast iron pan, cover, allowing it to vent, and set on very low heat for hours. Season with a little sugar and oregano at the end.

My standard feed-a-crowd dish was chili con carne: cook a pot of kidney beans, changing the water after the soak. Then lightly fry onions in olive oil, brown ground beef, add grated carrots (my secret—it sweetens the dish) and chopped garlic, bell and other peppers, and canned tomatoes, add a little sugar, salt and chili powder (or paprika, oregano, and cumin) then finish by adding the beans and cooking a bit more. Serve with hot pepper sauce on the side. At some point, in a different apartment, with a terrific oven, I got into making soufflés—cheese and then chocolate ones—for the *Jump Cut* crowd.

On one occasion British film theorist Stephen Heath was passing through Chicago and came to a meeting, got a *Jump Cut* T-shirt, and stayed for dinner. Stephanie Goldberg (now a professor of journalism at Columbia College, Chicago) had brought a casserole and Stephen ate a big portion and eagerly had a second big portion. Afterwards, the previously nameless dish was known as "Stephen Heath Casserole," and we recalled his visit every time we had it again. Recently Stephanie recalled the dish:

"The magic casserole you're referring to was something I made up myself. The base was a seasoned buckwheat groat pilaf with minced mushrooms. Then a layer of veggies and for the life of me, I can't remember what kind. Then about five pounds of cheddar. My god, it's amazing none of us has had a bypass."

All this nostalgia started a hunt for old photos that I'll attach here. Stay tuned, the next issue may uncover some Bay Area hot tub photos.



John Hess, Renny Harrigan



John Hess, Julia Lesage

Chuck Kleinhans

Snapshots of the editors in Jump Cut's early years



Chuck Kleinhans



John Hess



Julia Lesage

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